



# **The Sideways Sammy**

## **Season Preview**

**2022/23**

# Opening Words

With the new season starting around a week earlier than usual, this season preview has jumped up on me a little sooner than I'd have liked. It leaves me in the position of assessing both Coventry City and the rest of the Championship with nearly six weeks of the transfer window still to go, meaning things could look very different in September than they do now.

From a Coventry City perspective, the big unknown at the moment is just which of the team's star players will actually be staying on. While recent rumours linking Callum O'Hare away have died down, it shouldn't be assumed that the club are safe from losing either him or Gustavo Hamer or Viktor Gyokeres to a bigger club before the end of the transfer window. Losing just one of those three players would have a big impact on just what this season is all about.

As things stand, it hasn't quite been the summer of progress most had been hoping for after a promising previous campaign. Some of the team's performances last season suggested that a play-off push really wasn't that far off. If a touch more quality could have been found this summer, a bid for the top six would have looked a reasonable prospect.

That this summer's recruitment has been made up of a free transfer of a player unwanted by another Championship club, along with some very raw loan players, it

is hard to argue, without seeing these new signings in league action, that this team is stronger than it was last year.

That is often the sentiment with Coventry City heading into most new season, this has rarely been a club that has gone out and been able to recruit proven talent. It is Mark Robins' task to continue to work his magic with what he's been given. It is the manager who remains one of the biggest sources of confidence in this club heading into the new campaign.

On that note, it's time to crack on with the meat of this season preview, which is club-by-club previews of the Championship, individual player profiles, a profile of Mark Robins, a tactical preview, then my famed, 100% accurate, season predictions.

Just a note too that any data in this season preview is as accurate as possible as of the 9:30am on the 25<sup>th</sup> of July 2022. As mentioned at the start of this preamble, that obviously leaves a lot of time before the end of the transfer window, which could very much change my sentiment towards both Coventry City and the rest of the Championship.

Let's get on with previewing the new season!

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# Club-By-Club

## Previews



# Birmingham City

Last Season: 20<sup>th</sup> in the Championship

## Manager – John Eustace

A highly-respected coach whose only managerial experience thus far was a reasonably impressive stint in non-league with Kidderminster Harriers. It is a big step up and the worry is that Eustace is risking his reputation on a very difficult situation at St Andrew's

## Key Player – Dion Sanderson

The Wolves loanee's mid-season departure last year left Birmingham City looking a lot weaker in defence. A quick and physical centre-back who loves to put his body on the line, the only question mark is whether he is quite good enough on the ball for what may be a more possession-orientated approach under John Eustace.

## Overview

Off-the-field, Birmingham City continue to operate in a parlous state. With the summer having been defined by one takeover bid from the shady investor, Laurence Bassini, falling through, only for another involving the shady figure of Matt Southall appearing to be successful, on top of the current structural issues with the stadium, supporter sentiment is at an all-time low. Amid the chaos, the appointment of a young-and-upcoming manager, in John Eustace, looks a strangely sensible and forward-thinking decision.

John Eustace could be a key figure in steering Birmingham City out of the mess they are in. While there is little he can do about the off-field issues, Eustace could provide Blues with the managerial competence and playing identity they've lacked for a long time. A man who reportedly turned down job offers from Swansea City and Watford over the past year, Eustace showed at Kidderminster Harriers that he can coax an attractive passing game from limited players.

The scale of Eustace's task has been underlined by the summer's recruitment, which has been limited to free transfers and loans. While centre-backs Dion Sanderson and Auston Trusty, and winger Przemyslaw Placheta could be smart temporary additions, it doesn't begin to address what is a rapidly ageing squad. Along with John Eustace himself, the main source of optimism at St Andrew's is the emergence of a promising crop of academy players, led by Nico Gordon in defence and Jordan James in midfield.

If John Eustace can get his feet under the desk at Birmingham City, there is hope for better things both this season and going forward. However, the off-field issues continue to mount and show little sign of abating. The concern is that the job at Birmingham is too big for any individual to affect. A struggle against the drop looks more likely than not.

Squad Size

26

Average Age

26.5

Apps 21/22

590

Goals 21/22

41



# Blackburn Rovers

Last Season: 8<sup>th</sup> in the Championship

## Manager – Jon Dahl Tomasson

After a high-profile playing career, Jon Dahl Tomasson won back-to-back league titles in Sweden with Malmo. That he arrives in the English second-tier is a coup for Blackburn Rovers. The Dane showed flexibility at Malmo, playing counter-attacking football in Europe and a possession-based style in the league.

## Key Player – Ben Brereton Diaz

After a breakout season for both club and country, Blackburn Rovers have done well to hold onto Ben Brereton Diaz – with no strong rumours, as of yet, linking him away from the club. A physically powerful and quick forward who can play either through the middle or out wide, Brereton Diaz at full steam is a truly terrifying sight for opposing defences.

## Overview

The big question for Blackburn Rovers heading into this summer was just what the club would do next after the departure of Tony Mowbray as manager. After a largely successful five-year stint that saw the club turn itself around from League One into Championship play-off hopefuls, developing a number of exciting talents along the way, there was uncertainty as to whether the club's ownership had the ability to build on that progress.

On the face of it, the appointment Jon Dahl Tomasson after a highly-successful two-and-a-half year stint in Sweden looks to be the improvement in the dug-out Blackburn Rovers were hoping for. Backed up by the recruitment of a Director of Football, Gregg Broughton, any concerns that Blackburn would return to the incompetence of the early era under Venky's ownership look to have been proven unfounded.

Nonetheless, the relatively late arrivals of the duo has hindered Blackburn Rovers in the transfer market. Losing key performers from last year such as Darragh Lenihan, Jan Paul van Hecke, Ryan Nyambe and Reda Khadra without a single penny coming in, Rovers incoming recruitment has been slow. With the impressive right-back Callum Brittain the only new addition, Blackburn look a little undercooked heading into the new campaign.

Jon Dahl Tomasson is likely to have to bring through a number of younger players, with Hayden Carter in defence returning from a good loan spell at Portsmouth and forward Jack Vale impressing in pre-season. Unless Blackburn Rovers do well in the final weeks of the transfer window, they are looking ahead to a transitional campaign. There is too much quality around to get dragged into a relegation scrap, but they will do well to finish much above mid-table.

Squad Size

21

Average Age

24.6

Apps 21/22

509

Goals 21/22

51



# Blackpool

Last Season: 16<sup>th</sup> in the Championship

## Manager – Michael Appleton

Has improved as a manager after a forgettable 12-game stint at Blackpool earlier in his career, however, that spell has made Appleton an unpopular replacement for the successful Neil Critchley at Bloomfield Road. A manager with a good reputation for developing young talent, there are similarities between himself and his predecessor.

## Key Player – Josh Bowler

A tricky, two-footed, bandy-legged wide player who kickstarted what had threatened to be a wayward career last season at Blackpool, Josh Bowler looked close to leaving in January, but rumours have died down over the summer. If he can be kept on, Bowler's direct driving runs from out wide will be a key source of attacking inspiration for the team this year.

## Overview

Neil Critchley's decision to leave the manager's role at Blackpool to become Steven Gerrard's assistant manager at Aston Villa came as a huge shock to Blackpool. Having turned the club from mid-table in League One into a decent Championship outfit with a squad with little experience of second-tier football, there is understandable concern as to whether another manager can build on Critchley's work.

With Neil Critchley having found success at Blackpool by largely working with young drop-outs from Premier League academies, the appointment of a man with a similar approach, in Michael Appleton, makes a lot of sense. However, Appleton arrives at Bloomfield Road after a difficult campaign in League One with Lincoln City, adding to the point he will have to prove to fans who still remember his first, unsuccessful stint as Blackpool manager.

Without major additions over the summer, at the time of writing, Michael Appleton will have to find a way to get a tune out of another manager's squad. As impressive as Blackpool were for spells of last season, there was an underlying sense that quite a large portion of the squad were being elevated by Neil Critchley's inspiration in the dug-out. Josh Bowler, and maybe Shayne Lavery, aside, there doesn't appear to be a great deal of stand-out quality in this team, with a relegation battle looking likely unless Appleton can replicate Critchley's ability to raise the games of several players.

Michael Appleton may have been handed something of a hospital pass upon his return to Blackpool. While he has shown at other clubs that he is more than capable as a manager, he is a tarnished man at Bloomfield Road replacing someone who was very popular and successful. It wouldn't take much for things to spiral out of Appleton's control this season.

Squad Size

25

Average Age

26.4

Apps 21/22

632

Goals 21/22

67





# Bristol City

Last Season: 17<sup>th</sup> in the Championship

## Manager – Nigel Pearson

Has largely focused on clearing the decks at Ashton Gate after inheriting a team that had lost its way following a period of largesse. With a leaner squad that has had over a year to get used to his methods, more tangible progress will be expected of Nigel Pearson at Bristol City this year.

## Key Player – Andreas Weimann

The Austrian has dropped into a deeper role, just off the centre-forwards, in recent years and found some excellent form for both creating and scoring goals. An intelligent and hard-working player who is reaping the rewards for a career largely spent as a supporting cast member.

## Overview

The first season of a rebuild can be a very dangerous time for a football club, in maintaining their Championship status – by avoiding a relegation battle almost entirely – the Nigel Pearson era at Bristol City has passed its first test. Now that objective has been achieved, the focus is now on following that up with a more consistent, and exciting season.

There is a lot of confidence around Bristol City heading into the new campaign, and it's easy to see why. Having had the most prolific front three in the division last year – in Andreas Weimann, Antoine Semenyo and Chris Martin – along with the emergence of

one of the most exciting young talents in English football, in midfield playmaker, Alex Scott, the club has made a number of astute signings in the transfer market. Utility man, Kal Naismith, arrives having been a key player in Luton Town's top six finish last season, Kane Wilson was one of the best wing-backs in the country last season at Forest Green Rovers, while attacking midfielder, Mark Sykes, has long been a star player in League One.

Nonetheless, the big question mark against this Bristol City team is their defence and it's arguable whether those additions truly rectify that. With Kal Naismith not a natural centre-back, and Kane Wilson a predominantly attack-minded wing-back, the concern is that last season's Achilles' Heel will remain so. If there is to be an improvement in defence, it will come from the stricter discipline and organisation that Nigel Pearson struggled to instil last year.

That concern aside, there is a lot of positivity around Bristol City heading into the new season and it's hard not to feel like that might count for a lot. Even though they will have to prove they have improved as a defensive unit, Bristol City look one of the better bets to be this season's Championship dark horses.

Squad Size

27

Average Age

25.9

Apps 21/22

741

Goals 21/22

71





# Burnley

Last Season: 18<sup>th</sup> in the Premier League

## Manager – Vincent Kompany

A legendary player for Belgium and Manchester City, Vincent Kompany's managerial career began with a mixed couple of years at Belgian giants, Anderlecht. Prefers a heavily-possession-based style, whether he can enact it while under the pressure to win promotion could be tough for him to balance.

## Key Player – Scott Twine

The star player in League One last year at Milton Keynes Dons, scoring an incredible 20 goals and grabbing 13 assists, Twine looks a sure bet to make a big impact in the Championship this season. A skilful operator in the number 10 position with an eye for the spectacular, Twine's form may decide just how successful Vincent Kompany's rebuild of Burnley will be.

## Overview

After a long stay in the top-flight under Sean Dyche, it is a step into the wild blue yonder of Championship football for Burnley this season. With an opportunity, given their financial advantage over the rest of the division, to mount an instant return to the Premier League, it is intriguing, however, that Burnley have turned to a relatively inexperienced manager, in Vincent Kompany, and given him the freedom to completely rebuild the squad to his preferred style of play.

The additions of young, technical footballers – largely in defence – will make Burnley an interesting watch. Adding Aro Muric in goal, Luke McNally and Taylor Harwood-Bellis in central defence, Ian Maatsen at left-back, Josh Cullen in central midfield and Scott Twine further forward is certainly a commitment from Vincent Kompany to a certain style of play. The concern is that having so many young, physically-slight players could make Burnley a soft touch when they lose the ball.

At this moment in time, this is a squad that could really do with the addition of another centre-forward. Although Burnley have one of the potential attacking stars of this Championship season, in Scott Twine, the youngster could do with some support to ease the burden on him. Currently, this is a team that looks a little slight in defence and lacking in teeth going forward, it could be a formula for disaster.

Whether Vincent Kompany is successful or not in his rebuild of Burnley, they will certainly be one of the most interesting teams in the Championship to watch this season. If it comes off, people will have to change what they think of when it comes to Burnley Football Club. However, there looks to be more factors against this project coming off than in favour of it, at the time of writing.

Squad Size

25

Average Age

26.6

Apps 21/22

650

Goals 21/22

52



# Cardiff City

Last Season: 18<sup>th</sup> in the Championship

## Manager – Steve Morison

Steered the team to safety when things looked dicey last season and has earned the permanent gig at Cardiff City as a result. Talks a good game about evolving the team's style but has yet to back that up with consistent performances and results.

## Key Player – Romaine Sawyers

A supremely technically-gifted playmaker who can run games at this level of football when on song. Can be found wanting at times without the ball, but Sawyers is exactly the kind of footballer that Steve Morison wants to shape this Cardiff City team around.

## Overview

Having once had one of the oldest squads in the Championship, this season is the start of a new, fresher-faced era for Cardiff City. With nine first-team players released and twelve new signings (at the time of writing), manager Steve Morrison has accelerated his stated aim of making the Bluebirds a more dynamic outfit. The question now is whether Morison can back that aim up with results and performances on the pitch.

While Morison did a decent job in keeping the team up last season, Cardiff City's overall form since his arrival is relatively unimpressive. Furthermore, there was little evidence of Morison's desire to play a more progressive style of football, with Cardiff

tending to pick up wins when they reverted to the low-possession style that they were more comfortable with.

Cardiff City have certainly made a lot of signings this summer, whether many of those new faces are of the requisite quality or skill-set to transform the Bluebirds at Championship-level is debatable. On the plus side, Romaine Sawyers is exactly the kind of midfield playmaker Cardiff need, complementing Ryan Wintle, who is already at the club. The energetic Andy Rinomhota will add legs to support Sawyers and Wintle in the centre of the park, while left-back, Jamilu Collins, adds a pacey option from deep to stretch games. On top of that, there are some promising homegrown talents emerging, with attacking-midfielder, Rubin Colwill, at the vanguard.

The downside is that the squad looks short of the goalscoring striker that would decide whether Cardiff City's attempts to hoard possession are successful. Additionally, Steve Morison himself is probably the biggest question mark at this moment in time against this rebuild.

While there may be a danger of getting dragged into another relegation battle, there should be enough about this Cardiff City squad to stay away from that area of the table. Additionally, they are a club that will be proactive in making a change if Morison starts to flounder in his first full season as a manager.

Squad Size

27

Average Age

25.0

Apps 21/22

643

Goals 21/22

32



# Huddersfield Town

Last Season: 3<sup>rd</sup> in the Championship

## Manager – Danny Schofield

After the surprise departure of the influential Carlos Corberan with weeks to go ahead of the start of the season, the club quickly promoted first-team coach, Danny Schofield, to the permanent manager's role. With little known about his approach or quality as a manager, the club are placing a lot of faith in a rookie appointment.

## Key Player – Sorba Thomas

The delivery, both in open-play and from set-pieces, of the winger/wing-back was a key feature last season in Huddersfield Town's third-place finish. After the departures of Harry Toffolo and Lewis O'Brien, Thomas is now pretty much the sole key man for this Terriers outfit.

## Overview

From relegation candidates into play-off finalists, with little investment in the squad, Huddersfield Town's exploits under Carlos Corberan last season were extraordinary. Building on that was always going to be a challenge for Huddersfield, but the departure of Corberan with weeks left until the new season makes that task all the more difficult.

Occurring with recruitment well underway and long before the sales of Lewis O'Brien and Harry Toffolo, the timing of Carlos Corberan's departure is the most puzzling aspect. As much as it was understandable

why he may have felt it would have been difficult to ensure further success at a club with one of the smaller budgets in the division, exactly what aspect of Corberan's job had changed in the month following the play-off final is not yet apparent.

As big of a blow as it is to lose two star performers in Harry Toffolo at left-back and Lewis O'Brien in midfield, Huddersfield Town have done a decent job already in replacing them. Japanese centre-back/left-back Yuta Nakayama looks an intriguing addition in defence, while David Kasumu, Jack Rudoni and the returning Tino Anjorin look very smart signings to replace the energy and creative inspiration that O'Brien provided.

While another top six finish still looks a tall order for this Huddersfield Town squad, they look in a healthy place right now. The big question mark is the managerial situation, with the club having moved quickly to promote Danny Schofield, from within the coaching set-up, to the number one job. Just how smart continuity is over managerial experience will become apparent over the first few months of the campaign.

Some regression to the mean is likely for Huddersfield Town this season. As much as the example of relegated Barnsley last year should serve as a warning sign for the Terriers, there is enough about this squad to finish away from danger.

Squad Size

24

Average Age

26.0

Apps 21/22

609

Goals 21/22

60



# Hull City

Last Season: 19<sup>th</sup> in the Championship

## Manager – Shota Arveladze

Helped keep Hull City in the Championship relatively comfortably last season after his mid-season arrival, the jury remains out on just how capable Shota Arveladze really is as a manager. Has tended to adopt a pragmatic, counter-attacking approach, but may need to have something more up his sleeve to deliver progress this season.

## Key Player – Jacob Greaves

A calm, elegant centre-back who has emerged from the club's academy in recent years. In an era where Hull City are starting to target flashier, overseas players, Greaves can provide the stability to steer them through the challenges of the Championship.

## Overview

After a solid first year back in the Championship, this season promises to be a far more interesting one for Hull City. With the takeover of the club by Turkish media mogul, Acun Ilicali, the key thing to come out of last season, the recruitment of a number of interesting faces from the Turkish top-flight this summer is an indication of what this new era promises to be about.

While the club could do little about Keane Lewis-Potter's big-money departure to Premier League Brentford, the decision to allow fan favourite midfield tyro, George Honeyman, to leave for a Championship

rival looks something of a troubling indication as to what the Ilicali-era at Hull City may prove to be about. A lot of other clubs have attempted to bring in overseas players en masse to the Championship and only Watford have been able to make it work. To throw out such a dependable performer to make room for new faces may not give Hull the balance they may require for success.

Shota Arveladze's plan this season looks to be to continue to adopt a counter-attacking approach. Nathan Baxter in goal, with a centre-back pairing of Jacob Greaves and Tobias Figueiredo ahead looks a decent defensive unit that can soak up pressure. With Jean Michael Seri spraying passes for pacey forwards Ryan Longman, Dogukan Sinik, Allahyar Sayyadmanesh and Benjamin Tetteh, it could be an effective approach, but it will come down to how well many of those overseas-recruited attacking players can adapt to the Championship.

With Shota Arveladze still something of an unknown quantity as a manager, and a whole host of new signings with little experience outside of Turkey, it's hard to be too confident or negative about Hull City. It will either come together and they will be one of the season's surprise packages or it could fall to pieces rapidly. It's a wait and see.

Squad Size

25

Average Age

25.0

Apps 21/22

599

Goals 21/22

50



# Luton Town

Last Season: 6<sup>th</sup> in the Championship

## Manager – Nathan Jones

A passionate and driven presence in the dug-out, Nathan Jones has taken Luton Town from League Two into the Championship play-offs almost entirely through sheer force of character. Tending to adopt a high-intensity, pressing approach, Jones’ tactical flexibility often makes his side better than the sum of their parts.

## Key Player – Elijah Adebayo

Plucked from League Two 18 months ago, Adebayo has made the step up to the Championship almost seamlessly. A big physical presence, but one who possesses pace and skill in abundance, with a little more composure in front of goal, Adebayo would be a Premier League player.

## Overview

After a few seasons of quietly overperforming relative to their budget, last year was a breakthrough campaign for Luton Town, in making the top six. Any concerns that the Hatters could be set for a regression to the mean this season look to have been scotched by some smart additions in the transfer market, not to mention the continued presence of Nathan Jones as manager. The ambition at Kenilworth Road is clearly to go one better this time out.

Where Luton Town fell short last season was due to the team getting fatigued by Nathan Jones’ intense, high-pressing style of

play. While the congested fixture list, due to the mid-season World Cup, could make it even tougher for Luton Town to maintain the energy levels they require to be successful, the club have added the quality and quantity to the squad that should mitigate that concern.

The additions of the forward duo, Carlton Morris and Cauley Woodrow, provides Elijah Adebayo and Harry Cornick with the competition in attack that they didn’t have last season. With Adebayo and Cornick’s work-rate being as important as their goals, having options that can replicate those qualities makes Luton Town an especially dangerous prospect. Furthermore, the pacey Alfie Doughty from left-back and the addition of USA international, Ethan Horvath, in goal should further elevate what was already an effective team unit at Kenilworth Road.

As much as a club of Luton Town’s stature should probably be wary of expecting a top six place in the Championship, it’s hard not to feel that this is a team in a good place to build on what was a remarkable previous season. Over several years under Nathan Jones, Luton have proved that they can punch above their weight. Last year was no fluke and they now have a stronger, deeper squad.

Squad Size

30

Average Age

26.9

Apps 21/22

670

Goals 21/22

66





# Middlesbrough

Last Season: 7<sup>th</sup> in the Championship

## Manager – Chris Wilder

Having proved himself a capable manager in the top-flight, recruiting Chris Wilder to the hotseat at the Riverside Stadium was a statement of intent from Middlesbrough last season. A manager who likes to play intense, attack-minded football, he very nearly took Boro from mid-table anonymity into the top six last season and is targeting better this time out.

## Key Player – Isaiah Jones

A winger converted to wing-back whose pace and output on the right side meant that the decision to allow Djed Spence to head out on loan to a fellow Championship side was less of a clanger than it otherwise seemed. After a breakout campaign, the challenge for Jones will be how to adapt to teams better prepared for his explosive talents.

## Overview

After falling short of the top six last season, the target at Middlesbrough is promotion. Chris Wilder has quickly instilled an ambitious streak at the Riverside Stadium after arriving mid-way through last year. Having raised standards in his first few months in charge, Wilder has had the summer to whip his Middlesbrough squad into shape, ready for a tilt at the top two this time out.

There had been the promise of big-name arrivals to firm up Middlesbrough's ambitions this season, while that hasn't quite come to fruition, Boro have added some strong performers for second-tier football on top of what was already a strong-looking squad. Zack Steffen should represent an upgrade on Joe Lumley in goal, Darragh Lenihan adds further authority to Middlesbrough's back-line, while Ryan Giles at left wing-back will help overwhelm opponents struggling to contain Isaiah Jones on the right.

With a core of trusted performers for Chris Wilder to build around, from Dael Fry and Paddy McNair in defence, Jonny Howson in defensive midfield, and Matt Crooks pushing forward, this looks like a Middlesbrough squad that should be able to maintain a strong, consistent level of performance. The only missing element, at the time of writing, is the extra quality in the final third which was where last year's play-off bid fell awry.

Out of the teams without the benefit of parachute payments, Middlesbrough look the best-placed to launch a tilt at the top two spots. A strong team, with a good manager, that has recruited quality in the transfer market, it is hard to see Boro finishing much below the top six. There's pressure at the Riverside, but it's pressure Chris Wilder will be happy to shoulder.

Squad Size

21

Average Age

26.4

Apps 21/22

599

Goals 21/22

54



# Millwall

Last Season: 9<sup>th</sup> in the Championship

## Manager – Gary Rowett

A manager who consistently gets teams to punch above their weight at this level, with Gary Rowett in charge, Millwall look well-placed to build towards a top six finish. While his pragmatic approach doesn't exactly win over the neutrals, Rowett has the results to demonstrate his methods are effective.

## Key Player – Zian Flemming

An attacking midfielder with a knack for ghosting into the penalty area at key moments, it is clear to see why Millwall have opted for Flemming as their replacement for Jed Wallace. While a lack of physicality would ordinarily be a concern with recruiting players from the Netherlands, Flemming's physique and aerial ability look to make him well-suited for Championship football.

## Overview

With one key exception, it is business as usual for Millwall this summer after another solid, top-half campaign in the Championship under Gary Rowett. The Lions are a team that will rarely attract much limelight in this division, but their continued ability to punch above their weight should not be underestimated or taken for granted.

That one key exception is the departure of influential midfielder, Jed Wallace. While

there may be a doubt as to what Millwall look like without their talisman of recent years, they showed last season, with Wallace absent through occasional injury spells, that they are still a capable Championship outfit without him. With a formidable back-line, the focal point of Benik Afobe in attack, Tom Bradshaw's goal-poaching, and some pace in the forms of Mason Bennett and Tyler Burey, Millwall were already far from a one-man team before this summer's recruitment.

Millwall have made a handful of what look to be some rather astute summer signings. Dutchman, Zian Flemming, looks as good a replacement for Jed Wallace that a club such as Millwall could reasonably hope for, while the energy of George Honeyman and Jamie Shackleton in midfield feels in keeping with the ethos at the club. Millwall look a solid Championship outfit that could trouble the upper reaches of the division with the right wind behind them.

Millwall have consistently been tipped over the several years now to make that leap into the play-offs under Gary Rowett, yet they've never quite done so. Perhaps that is because there is a ceiling to what is possible under Rowett's conservative approach, or perhaps it is simply a matter of time before the leap occurs. It would be a stretch, nonetheless, to tip Millwall to make the top six, but they will surely be closer to there than the bottom six.

Squad Size

21

Average Age

26.7

Apps 21/22

604

Goals 21/22

69





# Norwich City

Last Season: 20<sup>th</sup> in the Premier League

## Manager – Dean Smith

Appointed mid-season with Norwich City looking pretty likely to get relegated, Dean Smith was unable to make much of an impact with a squad that was undercooked for top-flight football. A manager who has achieved good results at this level with an attractive style of play, Smith could do with a good start this season to distance himself from last year's relegation.

## Key Player – Teemu Pukki

The Finn was one of very few for Norwich City that came close to making the step up to Premier League level last year. At 32 years old, Teemu Pukki's hard-running style may be hard to keep up, but he has shown little sign of slowing down yet. He should terrorise Championship defences once again.

## Overview

It has become a truth universally acknowledged that Norwich City and Fulham will swap places between themselves in the Premier League and the Championship until the heat death of the universe. While there have been signs of disquiet from Norwich fans as to the ambition of the club, the Canaries look in as strong a place to return to the top-flight as they were two years ago.

Save for Emi Buendia, this is a very similar-looking Norwich City side to the one that steamrollered the Championship back in

2020/21. If winger, Milot Rashica, can find the form he struggled to in the top-flight last season, along with the intriguing, Gabriel Sara, adapting to English football directly from Brazil, Norwich might even be able to call themselves as strong as they were when they had Buendia.

The doubt comes from what impact last year's relegation has had on morale at the club. There is already a restlessness in the stands, if the team starts slowly, Dean Smith – who had a worse record last year than his predecessor, Daniel Farke – could be under real pressure. With a strong defence, good creative players, Teemu Pukki in attack with good back-up for him, and a manager in Dean Smith who has a pretty good record at Championship level, Norwich City should be in a good place season to quickly allay fears of a relegation hangover.

It probably reflects poorly on the Championship as a division that a team that looked so out of its depth in the level above is likely to finish rather comfortably towards the upper end this season. If Dean Smith can get Norwich City's attacking, creative players firing, the Canaries could prove to be devastating and, more importantly, maybe even in a better position to stick around in the top-flight.

Squad Size

26

Average Age

26.2

Apps 21/22

589

Goals 21/22

45



# Preston North End

Last Season: 13<sup>th</sup> in the Championship

## Manager – Ryan Lowe

A charismatic presence in the dug-out who quickly won over demoralised Preston North End fans last year as he instantly dragged them away from relegation danger and a brief flirtation with the top-half thanks to a positive, attack-minded style. After a clear-out of the squad this summer, Lowe promises further progress with a squad better-tooled to his approach.

## Key Player – Daniel Johnson

A cultured presence in midfield who is consistently the go-to man for Preston North End to make things happen in the final third. Capable of drifting past opponents through his skill on the ball or by picking a pass, anything good Preston do this season is likely to continue to have Johnson at the heart of matters.

## Overview

Having looked on a downward spiral over the past few seasons, Ryan Lowe has been the jolt of energy that Preston North End have badly needed. With some encouraging performances last season under Lowe's charge and a summer to transform the squad, there is optimism at Deepdale that Preston can be one of the surprise packages in the Championship this season.

Ryan Lowe's attacking, almost gung-ho, brand of football sparked a lifeless Preston North End squad to life last season. In

particular, midfielders Ben Whiteman and Daniel Johnson seemed to relish the platform to Lowe handed them to take the game to opponents. It was only a lack of pace at wing-back and in defence that prevented Preston from fully enacting Lowe's style of play.

What had promised to be an overhaul to the squad hasn't quite been backed up with many exciting additions. Freddie Woodman in goal looks the best piece of business thus far, with others, such as Ben Woodburn and Robbie Brady, looking riskier transfer market moves. With little support for Emil Riis Jakobsen in attack and the big issue of a lack of pace in defence yet to be addressed, there is plenty of work for North End to do in the market in the weeks ahead.

As much as Ryan Lowe's presence in the dug-out is infectious in and of itself, he is going to need the resources to work with in order to build on some promising signs last year. As things stand, Preston North End don't really look any stronger than they were heading into the summer. That may change before September, but it's hard to tip them much above mid-table until the final pieces of business are known.

Squad Size

22

Average Age

26.9

Apps 21/22

540

Goals 21/22

45



# Queens Park Rangers

Last Season: 11<sup>th</sup> in the Championship

## Manager – Michael Beale

A talented coach who has had spells at Liverpool, Rangers, and Aston Villa, just how Michael Beale makes the step up to the manager's role remains to be seen. As someone with a background in youth football, Beale is likely to be happy with a young and improving Queens Park Rangers squad but will have to quickly prove why the club felt he would be an improvement on his experienced predecessor, Mark Warburton.

## Key Player – Chris Willock

After being vaunted for his potential for much of his career, Chris Willock finally started to deliver a more tangible impact last year, emerging as Queens Park Rangers' leading light amid a play-off charge. A creative midfielder with an eye for the spectacular, Willock's grounding as a wide player also lends him great close control to evade opponents.

## Overview

As disappointing as it was for Queens Park Rangers to miss out on what had looked to be a certain top six place last season, the decision to part ways with manager, Mark Warburton, looked something of an overreaction. With the inexperienced Michael Beale arriving as Warburton's replacement, just what QPR are hoping to achieve at this moment in time is not entirely clear.

While it has been reported that Michael Beale was doing much of Steven Gerrard's managerial work during successful spells at Rangers and Aston Villa, there are plenty of highly-regarded coaches who have had similar things said about them in the past that have failed to make the step up when handed their own gigs.

With summer recruitment focused on filling one or two gaps in the squad, the task for Michael Beale will be to do with this QPR side what Mark Warburton could not last season, get them into the play-offs. The additions of Jake Clarke-Salter and Kenneth Paal in defence, with Tyler Roberts coming into the attack, provide useful options for Beale, but it will be about how the rookie manager utilises the template of Seny Dieng in goal, Rob Dickie and Jimmy Dunne in defence, Stefan Johansen and Sam Field in midfield, and the creativity of Ilias Chair and Chris Willock in the final third that will define QPR's season.

If Michael Beale is anywhere near as good a manager as he is a coach, there is the basis of a top six side at Queens Park Rangers this season. If he takes time, like any rookie would, to make the step up as a head coach, then QPR may have let an opportunity to see Mark Warburton's work at Loftus Road in recent years come to fruition pass them by.

Squad Size

24

Average Age

25.6

Apps 21/22

597

Goals 21/22

45



# Reading

Last Season: 21<sup>st</sup> in the Championship

## Manager – Paul Ince

After an eight-year spell in the managerial wilderness, Paul Ince was plucked out to lead Reading over the line to safety. While he did enough to keep the team in the division, his track record suggests he isn't capable of taking the team further forward. It doesn't help that Reading continue to operate under significant restrictions in the transfer market.

## Key Player – Lucas Joao

The one big asset left at the club after years of financial restrictions caused by overspending, Reading simply would not be able to replace Lucas Joao were he to leave this summer. A tall, powerful centre-forward who has found scoring form with the Royals, a full season from Joao would likely keep Reading in the division.

## Overview

After narrowly avoiding relegation last time out, Reading look in an even worse place than they were 12 months ago. Continuing to operate under severe financial restrictions, having lost several key players – most notably, John Swift – on free transfers, and with Paul Ince as manager, the Royals should be anticipating another difficult campaign ahead.

The appointment of Mark Bowen as Head of Football Operations at least brings some knowhow to the running of the club. Bowen,

who seemingly appointed himself as Reading manager when he had the post in 2019, steps into a vacuum of leadership at the Madejski Stadium which had seen the club overspend and underperform, leaving them in the mire they are in today.

Only able to recruit free agents and loan players, Mark Bowen and Paul Ince have attempted to bring organisation to a Reading squad that has been awkwardly melded together between eras of overspending and tight financial restrictions. Key pieces of business have been in holding onto the reliable Andy Yiadom at right-back, as well as Junior Hoilett and Lucas Joao, rather than anyone brought in. This is, however, a Reading squad increasingly short on experience and quality, with youngsters such as Dejan Tetek, Femi Azeez, and Jahmari Clarke likely to have to plug the gaps the recruitment cannot cover.

This looks a lot like the season where the restrictions Reading have to operate under become too severe for them to survive in the Championship. Under the current ownership, it is hard to see a route out of the mess that Reading have found themselves in. If it isn't this season, then relegation looks only a matter of time for Reading.

Squad Size

22

Average Age

27.0

Apps 21/22

524

Goals 21/22

44



# Rotherham United

Last Season: 2<sup>nd</sup> in League One

## Manager – Paul Warne

With three promotions and three relegations on his managerial record at Rotherham United, Paul Warne will be desperate to prove this season that he can be successful with this team at this level. Has tended to adopt a high-energy, pressing approach centred on physicality, which can unsettle teams at this level, even if it hasn't quite led to consistent results.

## Key Player – Daniel Barlaser

The former Newcastle United youngster may prove to be a key element in helping finally establish Rotherham United in the Championship. An elegant ball-playing midfielder with great set-piece delivery, the more Rotherham can get him on the ball, the better chance they have of controlling games and forcing the issue on opponents.

## Overview

Rotherham United are now in the seventh season of a relegation-promotion cycle under the management of Paul Warne. While it means that the Millers' seasons are never short on excitement, it is up to Warne to demonstrate that he has learned from the three relegations at this level that he has endured with this club and finally establish Rotherham in the second-tier.

It is not that Rotherham United have been particularly poor when they have been in the Championship. In fact, they have often

impressed with their high-intensity style of play, which has seen them trouble many of the better teams at this level. However, a lack of killer touch, as well as an element of fatigue, has been where Rotherham have fallen short in establishing themselves in the second-tier under Paul Warne.

The departures of key men, Michael Ihiekwe in defence and Michael Smith in attack, are a huge blow to Rotherham United's prospects this season. That the duo have left for a League One side and local rivals, in Sheffield Wednesday, makes the blow even tougher to take. Whether Jamie McCart and Cameron Humphreys are strong enough replacements for the former, and Tom Eaves and Conor Washington for the latter is hard to argue. The decision to convert winger Chiedozie Ogbene to wing-back last season, as well as the form of midfielders Ben Wiles, Ollie Rathbone, and Daniel Barlaser, look to be where the Millers have improved on two years ago.

If Rotherham United are to finally stay up in the Championship, greater resilience, and ability to dig out results than in previous attempts will be absolutely crucial. It may also help that there could be at least three worse teams than them out there, but the Millers should be prepared for a hard clog of a campaign.

Squad Size

23

Average Age

25.9

Apps 21/22

634

Goals 21/22

72





# Sheffield United

Last Season: 5<sup>th</sup> in the Championship

## Manager – Paul Heckingbottom

Stepped up to the full-time job last season and delivered a top six finish at Bramall Lane, the jury remains out on Heckingbottom, nonetheless. Has reverted to a similar approach to what worked under Chris Wilder in a previous era, this season will be about Heckingbottom implementing more of his own ideas.

## Key Player – Oliver Norwood

The Northern Ireland international's ability to dictate games at this level from central midfield provides Sheffield United with the control to not only threaten the opposition but to avoid their defence being put under pressure. At 31, there is little sign of regression in Norwood's game, the Blades should be looking forward to another year of consistent performances from the central midfielder.

## Overview

A top six finish last season represented par for a Sheffield United outfit enjoying their first season of parachute payments. With an experienced squad of proven performers at this level, a few solid pieces of summer recruitment and a reasonably popular manager in charge, the ambition this time out should be to go one better.

For a lot of this Sheffield United squad, this may be their last shot at winning promotion from the Championship with this club. Key

players such as Enda Stevens, Chris Basham, John Fleck, Oliver Norwood, and Billy Sharp won't be around forever. Furthermore, the club will struggle to hold onto the likes of Jayden Bogle, Sander Berge, and Rhian Brewster if they remain in the second-tier much longer. If it isn't this season, it may take a few years for the Blades to get themselves back in a place to push for the Premier League.

The additions of defenders Anel Ahmedhodzic and Ciaran Clark, along with Tommy Doyle in midfield supplement what is already a strong squad. The only area where Sheffield United look short is of a replacement for Morgan Gibbs-White as the creative fulcrum in the final third. However, youngster, Iliman Ndiaye, may be able to step up, while there are plenty of striker options that could end up negating the need for a number ten/deep-lying forward in the mould of Gibbs-White.

Perhaps it is just the sense that nothing radical has happened to inject momentum at Bramall Lane since Paul Heckingbottom's appointment in December last year that makes it hard to get too excited about this Sheffield United side. Unless a number of key performers suddenly drop-off, this Blades squad looks well-set to make at least the top six.

Squad Size

25

Average Age

27.0

Apps 21/22

641

Goals 21/22

55



# Stoke City

Last Season: 14<sup>th</sup> in the Championship

## Manager – Michael O’Neill

Has carved out the rot that he inherited at Stoke City three seasons ago but has yet to make further progress. Can organise a team and occasionally get them playing good football, Michael O’Neill has struggled for consistency at Stoke. If a top six bid looks like falling short again this season, the club’s patience in O’Neill may finally be up.

## Key Player – Jacob Brown

A hard-running and intelligent forward, Brown has been one of Michael O’Neill’s most consistent performers during his time at Stoke City. Capable of moments of quality on top of the work-rate, it would transform Stoke’s prospects if Brown can take a further step forward in his development this year.

## Overview

Excuses for finishing mid-table are starting to run out for Michael O’Neill at Stoke City. The former Northern Ireland manager inherited a mess two-and-a-half seasons ago, but that excuse is no longer relevant in the current day. The past two seasons have seen O’Neill well-backed and unable to deliver anything close to a top six finish. Stoke’s owners have been admirably patient with O’Neill, but now is surely the time to deliver more tangible on-field progress.

Stoke City have what looks to be a solid, but not outstanding, squad. Physical and

imposing at the back and with a number of individual match-winners further forward, Stoke City are very close to being an effective winning unit. However, the last two seasons seem to have shown that there is a collective fragility whenever the top six has looked close.

The addition of Josh Laurent to the midfield provides the physical presence in the centre of the park that the team has probably lacked in recent years, while Galvin Kilkenny and Will Smallbone offer some control in possession to allow the likes of Lewis Baker and Nick Powell to do their thing further forward. Dwight Gayle should score goals, alongside existing forwards, Jacob Brown, and Tyrese Campbell, it’s just that Michael O’Neill has had players of this level of quality to call upon for much of his time in charge and has yet to really come close to making the top six.

If it wasn’t for the underperformance under Michael O’Neill over the past two seasons, Stoke City would be considered in the conversation for the top six heading into this campaign. While O’Neill is clearly a very competent manager, he just looks unable to coax Stoke into a side that can make that leap into the play-offs. Stoke enter the season with a manager in place who is running short on excuses for underperformance.

Squad Size

27

Average Age

25.8

Apps 21/22

598

Goals 21/22

51





# Sunderland

Last Season: 5<sup>th</sup> in League One

## Manager – Alex Neil

After years of anguish in League One, Alex Neil calmly swooped in mid-season and steered Sunderland back into the second-tier. An intelligent operator in the dug-out who places a priority on tactical discipline and work-rate, Neil is the right man to establish the Black Cats back at this level.

## Key Player – Ross Stewart

The giant centre-forward found scoring form last season in a way he hadn't enjoyed before in his career. A powerful presence in attack who can be something of a confidence player, a lot may end up resting for Sunderland on Stewart making the step up to Championship football.

## Overview

It has taken much longer for Sunderland to return to the second-tier than anyone of a Mackem persuasion anticipated back in 2018. After trawling through various players and managers, Sunderland were somewhat fortunate to land on a canny operator mid-way through last season, in Alex Neil, with another campaign looking set to go off the rails. The Scot has lost just one game thus far at the Stadium of Light, underlining just how quickly he has instilled organisation and purpose at the club.

Back in the second-tier, it is Neil that remains Sunderland's major source of optimism. While the addition of Northern

Ireland international, Daniel Ballard, in central defence indicates that the club retains pulling power in the transfer market, Neil is likely to have to operate with a squad that has few clear standout performers at Championship level.

The Black Cats found a successful formula last season based on the goals of Ross Stewart – with Nathan Broadhead, who has yet to return to the club, stepping in when Stewart dipped in form – a creative hub of Alex Pritchard, Elliot Embleton, and Jack Clarke, with the rest of the team tasked with keeping things tight at the back. Without major additions, at the time of writing, to that attacking set-up, Sunderland will be hoping that the likes of Stewart, Embleton and Clarke can impact the second-tier, while the solid, hard-working defensive players will have to show that they can cope with a higher quality of opponent – which is where the addition of Daniel Ballard should help.

Sunderland should know all too well by now the dangers of running before they can walk. In Alex Neil, they have a man in charge who will keep feet firmly on the ground and is able to dig out results when needed. Staying up has to be seen as the primary task for this Sunderland team, if it can be achieved with a degree of comfort, that will be job done for this first season back in the second-tier.

Squad Size

25

Average Age

24.6

Apps 21/22

598

Goals 21/22

74



# Swansea City

Last Season: 15<sup>th</sup> in the Championship

## Manager – Russell Martin

Arrived last season without the benefit of a pre-season in order to implement an overhaul of the team's style into his preferred heavily possession-based approach. Nonetheless, Martin produced a number of noteworthy performances from his side, with several players taking huge leaps forward in their development under his charge.

## Key Player – Joel Piroe

Plucked from PSV Eindhoven's youth system without much of a track record behind him, Joel Piroe proved to be one of the best strikers in the Championship last season. An intelligent forward in his ability to get into scoring positions, keeping Piroe at the club should allow Swansea City to push further up the table this year.

## Overview

There were moments last season where Swansea City under Russell Martin looked capable of making a push for the top six, however, in a year after many key players had been lost and the manager arrived late into pre-season, it was understandable that the Swans were not quite ready to make that leap. After achieving a passing grade last year, the onus is now on more tangible progress for Russell Martin's Swansea City outfit.

Key to Martin's plans this year is likely to be holding onto key attacking duo, Joel Piroe and Michael Obafemi. Dutchman, Piroe, was an instant success at the Liberty Stadium, firing in 22 Championship goals. The pacey Obafemi took a while to get going, but eventually registered 12 from 32 appearances and looks in a good place to get close to Piroe's tally last season. That pressure to sell has been eased by the departure of midfield tyro, Flynn Downes, to West Ham United, although, Piroe is reportedly refusing to sign a contract extension.

While Downes' combination of aggression and quality in possession will be hard for Swansea to replace, keeping a strike pairing of 30-40 goals feels an acceptable trade-off. With the quality on the ball of Andy Fisher in goal, Ryan Manning and Harry Darling in defence and Matt Grimes in midfield, Swansea should be able to continue to supply Piroe and Obafemi with the service on which they will thrive, with Jamie Paterson also chipping in with goals from an attacking midfield berth.

A concern is that Swansea City may be rather lightweight in defence and midfield, but Russell Martin has shown that his team can dominate the ball to the extent that that may not matter. With a prolific strike partnership, the Swans look well-placed to challenge for the top six.

Squad Size

25

Average Age

24.8

Apps 21/22

719

Goals 21/22

68



# Watford

Last Season: 19<sup>th</sup> in the Premier League

## Manager – Rob Edwards

A former England youth coach who showed in his first season as an EFL manager, with Forest Green Rovers, that he can put together an attractive, winning team. In moving to Watford, a club famed for their short-termist approach to managers, Edwards is taking as much of a risk as the club are in him.

## Key Player – Imran Louza

The Moroccan playmaker was a rare bright spark during Watford's relegation from the Premier League last season. Capable of dictating the game from deep, Louza should relish spraying passes around in a more attack-minded Hornets outfit.

## Overview

Watford desperately need a change in approach if they are to establish themselves as a Premier League club over the long-term. While they achieved promotion at the first time of asking the last time they were in the Championship, by following the same model that brought relegation, it was hardly a surprise to see them quickly tumble back into the second-tier. In appointing a young, English coach, in Rob Edwards, Watford are hoping to change the way they do business, but the new manager should be wary that substance will be as important as style at Vicarage Road this season.

The new approach has led to a summer concentrated on clearing out the decks to allow Rob Edwards to impose order on a bloated Watford squad. While players such as Kiko Femenia, Cucho Hernandez and Moussa Sissoko could have been made to stay on in a different era, Edwards made it clear he didn't want players around who didn't want to play in the Championship.

Just how strong the remainder of this Watford squad really is may well come down to keeping hold of at least one of star attackers, Ismaila Sarr and Emmanuel Dennis. As much as the rather circumspect incoming recruitment will have helped Rob Edwards assess the players he has and put in some important tactical work over pre-season, there isn't a ton of star quality beyond Sarr and Dennis, with Imran Louza in midfield the only other who looks like dominating the Championship.

With at least one of Ismaila Sarr and Emmanuel Dennis, Watford should ease to at least the top six. If they were to lose the both of them, this could well become a transitional season for the Hornets. Just whether the club are willing to patient with what could be a long-term rebuild under a manager who is jumping up two divisions, in Rob Edwards, may well be the real acid test for Watford this season. It's hard to feel strong about their prospects until their squad come the 1<sup>st</sup> of September is known.

Squad Size

32

Average Age

26.0

Apps 21/22

697

Goals 21/22

64



# West Bromwich Albion

Last Season: 10<sup>th</sup> in the Championship

## Manager – Steve Bruce

A serial promotion-winner at Championship-level but someone who is in danger of falling out-of-step with the contemporary game. After making little impact after arriving in February, Bruce will be under pressure from early on to demonstrate that he remains relevant as a manager at this level in 2022.

## Key Player – John Swift

One of the best players in the Championship last season in a struggling Reading side, Swift joins a West Bromwich Albion outfit commensurate to his level of ability. With Albion having lacked creative spark, Swift's ability to both dictate games and step up with goals and assists will be more than welcome.

## Overview

For a club that had not finished lower than sixth in the second-tier in over two decades, a 10<sup>th</sup>-place Championship finish last year was a disaster for West Bromwich Albion. In order to rectify that, a number of proven performers have arrived at The Hawthorns this summer. Whether that indicates that those lessons have been learned will only become apparent as the season plays out.

The additions of John Swift and Jed Wallace provide West Bromwich Albion with the creativity and goal threat that they severely lacked last season, the big doubt about this

team is whether they have done the right thing in backing Steve Bruce to remain as manager. After making what was arguably even a negative impact since arriving mid-way through last year and off the back of a few underwhelming managerial stints at other clubs, Bruce is not the guarantee of promotion at this level that he was around a decade ago.

The template for the Baggies this season looks set to be centred around keeping things solid at the back in order to allow Jed Wallace, John Swift, Karlan Grant and Daryl Dike to do their thing further forward. Losing Sam Johnstone and Matt Clarke from last season's defensive unit is a concern, along with the declining performances of captain, Kyle Bartley. The return of defensive midfielder, Okay Yokuslu, may help provide that solidity at the back, but West Bromwich Albion could probably do with a couple of defensive additions before they look in shape for a promotion bid.

There are reasons to be positive about West Bromwich Albion's prospects this season, but there are also more than a few sources of concern. A lot rests on the managerial talents of Steve Bruce, which may be asking a lot in this day and age.

Squad Size

23

Average Age

27.1

Apps 21/22

613

Goals 21/22

69



# Wigan Athletic

Last Season: 1<sup>st</sup> in League One

## Manager – Leam Richardson

Having operated as an assistant manager for much of his coaching career, Leam Richardson initially stepped into the fold at Wigan Athletic to keep the club in League One. Following a takeover the following summer, Richardson was backed to put together a promotion-winning side and did so, making Wigan a harmonious, winning unit.

## Key Player – Will Keane

At 29 years old, time had been running out on Will Keane to prove himself as more than a once bright prospect, 26 league goals last year was a breakthrough moment for the forward. A tall, languid presence in attack who had largely been a target-man prior to his time at Wigan Athletic, a move into a position just behind the centre-forward has been the making of Keane's career.

## Overview

Relegated from the Championship due to shady financial wranglings from a previous owner, the shell of a club that was Wigan Athletic looked all but certain for League Two 18 months ago. After a remarkable escape from relegation under Leam Richardson, a subsequent takeover, and a pretty comfortable promotion campaign, Wigan Athletic are now a completely different football club.

Built around experienced, proven League One performers, the main question upon Wigan Athletic's return to the second-tier is whether those players can be as effective in the Championship. With the oldest squad in the division, key performers, such as Tom Naylor, Sam Morsy and Max Power in midfield, James McClean out wide, and Will Keane in attack are at an age where they have little scope for improvement and have rarely ever been much more than solid Championship players.

With little incoming transfer activity, at the time of writing, manager Leam Richardson is hoping that a very good League One side can prove to be an effective Championship one. The quality of attacking duo, Will Keane and Callum Lang, may be Richardson's ace up his sleeve. However, the recent history of this division has proven that there is a sizeable gulf in quality between the two leagues. Richardson and Wigan Athletic at least have a recent successful experience of fighting relegation.

This campaign may come down to what kind of quality Wigan Athletic can source in the transfer window before the end of August. There is a solid template in place, but the Latics could do with a little bit more x-factor across the pitch if they are to win games reliably at Championship-level.

Squad Size

22

Average Age

28.7

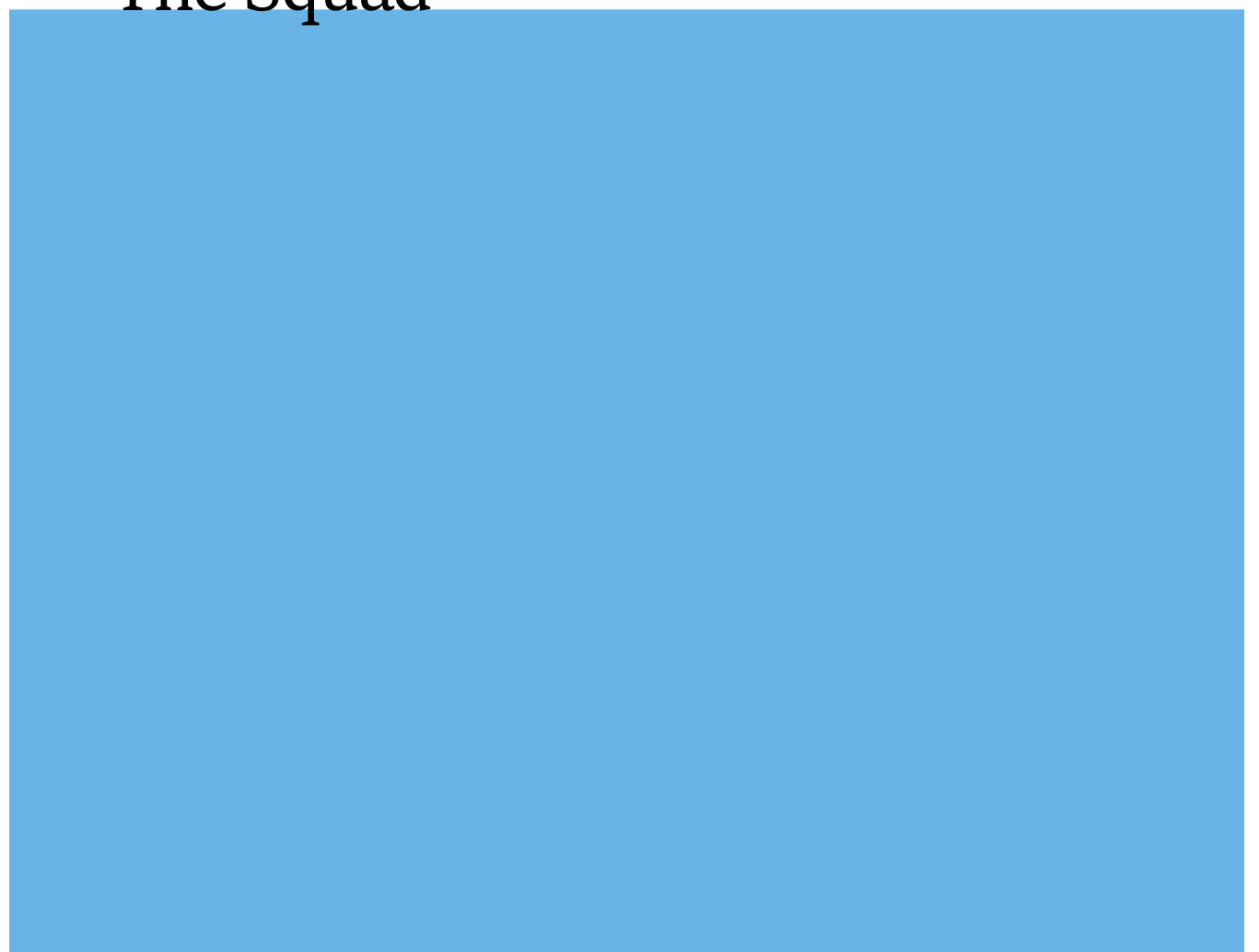
Apps 21/22

635

Goals 21/22

84

# The Squad





# Simon Moore

GK

Age: 32

At Club Since: Summer 2021

Signed From: Sheffield United

League Appearances 2021/22: 41

League Goals Conceded 2021/22: 54

League Clean Sheets 2021/22: 9

After ending a solid first season at Coventry City on the bench, the first task for Simon Moore this time out is to prove that he is still worthy of the number one spot. Whether he will start the campaign with that place in the side looks, surprisingly, like something up for question.

A solid all-round goalkeeper with few standout weaknesses or strengths, the assuredness that Simon Moore projected in his first few months at the club made him an instant success at Coventry City. As the season progressed, however, Moore was as responsible as any member of the defence for some of the soft goals that the team leaked, which is why Mark Robins has spent much of the past few months putting his position under pressure.

To continue to keep Moore out for the start of the campaign would be harsh, if only because the main competition, Ben Wilson, has shown himself to be a much more erratic performer between the sticks. While Simon Moore isn't without his faults as a goalkeeper, the consistency and authority in his performances are what marks him out as the superior candidate for the

position, out of the options currently on the club's books.

Calm under crosses and capable of making some excellent reaction saves when at his best, Simon Moore has rarely let the team down in a notable manner. The biggest weakness in his game is being slightly too slow to come off his line at times, which became an issue over the course of last season because the team had a habit of getting caught out when pushing up the pitch. However, it is a deficiency that could be mitigated by better defending ahead of him.

The goalkeeper position has been an issue for Coventry City for much of the past decade, which is why Simon Moore's arrival at the club last year was so welcome. As much as there should be pressure on any player's position in the team, it is hard not to feel that the debate in goal has been settled for the time being.



# Ben Wilson

GK

Age: 29

At Club Since: Summer 2019

Signed From: Bradford City

League Appearances 2021/22: 5

League Goals Conceded 2021/22: 5

League Clean Sheets 2021/22: 1

After a nervous, interim spell as number one goalkeeper two years ago, it was little surprise to see Ben Wilson return to back-up status last year. Occasionally capable of producing some stand-out saves, Wilson's erratic nature and lack of authority is what marks him out as someone who cannot be depended on over an extended run of games.

Although he enjoyed a spell in the side towards the back end of the campaign, Ben Wilson showed just why he remains the second-choice in goal. A penalty save against West Bromwich Albion aside, Wilson did little to unsettle Simon Moore's place in the side. Far less commanding than his direct competitor, the glaring weakness in Wilson's game is just how incredibly reckless he is in charging off his line, leaving him prone to conceding penalties or seeing opposing forwards dribble round him and into an empty net.

Intriguingly, Ben Wilson has featured heavily as a starter during pre-season. While this may just be a shrewd piece of man management from Mark Robins to simultaneously put a first-choice player under pressure and keep

their back-up happy, it would be bizarre if Wilson was now considered the number one in goal. After all, Wilson has proved on multiple occasions that he isn't of first-choice standard, neither is he young enough to believe that he may suddenly reach that level.

As an option to come in for the odd game to keep Simon Moore on his toes, Ben Wilson could continue to have a use at Coventry City. As the first-choice goalkeeper, it feels as if Wilson would only make the team weaker. Unless there is something that Mark Robins has seen in training that fans cannot, it would be hard to justify Wilson playing regularly ahead of Moore this season.

In the final year of his contract, it feels like next season may be a good opportunity to move Ben Wilson on and target having genuine competition for the goalkeeper position.

# Jack Burroughs

RB/LB/W/CM

Age: 21

At Club Since: N/A

Signed From: Academy Product

League Appearances 2021/22: 17

League Goals 2021/22: 0

League Assists 2021/22: 1

A Scotland under-21 international who enjoyed a full season around a first-team, at Ross County, last year, Jack Burroughs has a decent opportunity this season to stake a claim as a member of the senior squad now that he has returned to Coventry City.

The big issue for Jack Burroughs remains that he has yet to settle on a preferred position. Having come through as a central midfielder, then a winger, the club appear to want Burroughs to play as a right wing-back. Although he has played there for the couple of league appearances he has made for the club thus far – as well as for the Scotland under-21 side – he did not play there regularly for Ross County.

That spell in Scotland last season saw Burroughs make the majority of his appearances from the bench and in a number of positions – centre-back, both full-back positions, out wide, and even as a makeshift centre-forward. As valuable as that versatility could be in allowing Jack Burroughs to gain experience in the early phase in his career, his longer-term prospects are likely to be enhanced by settling on a position.

Currently, Jack Burroughs' best chance of breaking into the first-team is at right wing-back. With Todd Kane rumoured to be leaving the club, it is between Burroughs and Eccles, who may be needed in midfield, to provide back-up for Fankaty Dabo in the position.

Jack Burroughs' experience as an attacking player makes him someone who provides a lot of energy and intent at wing-back. Where he needs to improve in the position is in his defensive ability.

It would be a huge show of faith from Mark Robins to trust Jack Burroughs with the role as back-up right wing-back this season. Burroughs is a player that the manager has talked up in the past for his tactical intelligence and versatility, the question is whether, on top of that, Burroughs can demonstrate that he can impact games in the Championship.

Jack Burroughs looks to be a player that Mark Robins wants to find a role for in the first-team squad, this season may be crucial in deciding whether he has the quality to make that step up.

# Fankaty Dabo

RB

Age: 26

At Club Since: Summer 2019

Signed From: Chelsea

League Appearances 2021/22: 29

League Goals 2021/22: 0

League Assists 2021/22: 1

A fully-fit and in-form Fankaty Dabo is a huge asset for this Coventry City, the issue over the past two seasons has been that Dabo has been neither fit nor in form for long enough in order to make the impact he is capable of on a regular basis.

A dynamic and skilful footballer down the right wing, Fankaty Dabo's ball-carrying ability provides the team with another gear in attack when he's at his best. A committed defender too, Dabo is quite clearly the strongest right wing-back on the club's books.

Aside from the fitness and form issues, the one area of Fankaty Dabo's game that could do with improvement is his final ball. For all of the impact Dabo makes on games with his ability to stretch play, his final ball is rather hit and miss. Dabo appears to have a tendency to hold onto the ball for a little too long when he has the chance to put a cross in. Given that the wing-back berth can be as much about playing as an auxiliary forward as it is being a defender, Dabo needs to do more to prove that he has an attacking end product to add to the role he plays in the build-up play.

That may be something that could be worked on with a better run of games than he has enjoyed over the past two seasons. Fankaty Dabo's recent campaigns have largely been defined by periods of either being injured or looking to recover from an injury, which may have taken the focus away from developing and improving his game.

With better luck with injuries this season, Fankaty Dabo should be looking forward to bolstering his reputation as one of the better right-backs in the Championship. The concern is that a congested fixture schedule may not afford Dabo the opportunity to play himself into either fitness or form this campaign.

It may well be up to Mark Robins to manage Fankaty Dabo's fitness more adeptly than he has over recent campaigns. As much as the manager may be loath to leave out such a strong performer, if Dabo can evade burn-out over this coming campaign, he is going to be more effective for more of the season.

# Todd Kane

RB

Age: 28

At Club Since: Summer 2022

Signed From: Queens Park Rangers

League Appearances 2021/22: 29

League Goals 2021/22: 1

League Assists 2021/22: 4

Looking to be on the way out of the club, at the time of writing, Todd Kane showed last season that he is someone who can make a reasonable impact on games from right wing-back, providing useful competition for Fankaty Dabo.

Kane's biggest asset as a wing-back is his desire to put crosses into the box. While his accuracy can be somewhat hit and miss, his clear intention to put crosses in at any and every opportunity meant that his teammates began to gamble on making runs when Kane had the ball in wide areas, leading to a decent number of assists.

It is the other areas of Todd Kane's game that are his drawbacks. While he provides a form of attacking threat with his crossing, Kane is a weaker ball-carrier than Fankaty Dabo, meaning that the team loses an element of dynamism in their play when he starts over his main competition at right wing-back.

Furthermore, Kane is not a particularly strong defender. Struggling in one-versus-one situations, Kane has a tendency to

backtrack when faced up by opposing forwards, often putting the onus on his defensive colleagues to put in challenges.

Despite those deficiencies, Todd Kane showed last season that he is a player with his uses. In games where opponents sit back and allow him to get up the pitch, Kane's desire to cross provided the team with a different kind of threat that can open up defences. When the team had to play on the counter-attack, Kane struggled to get up the pitch and make an impact.

Just why Todd Kane is moving on from the club is not entirely clear, at the time of writing. Perhaps he was looking for a guarantee of regular football, which is something that Mark Robins could not make due to the importance of Fankaty Dabo to the first-team.

Todd Kane will be remembered at Coventry City as someone who had his uses, but also carried a fair few deficiencies at the same time.

# Jake Bidwell

LB/CB

Age: 29

At Club Since: January 2022

Signed From: Swansea City

League Appearances 2021/22: 32

League Goals 2021/22: 2

League Assists 2021/22: 1

Having arrived at Coventry City in January with a reputation as one of the better left wing-backs in the Championship in recent years, Jake Bidwell has underwhelmed in his time at the club thus far.

What was particularly surprising about Bidwell's first few appearances for the Sky Blues was just how uncomfortable he looked at left wing-back for someone who has played a lot of football in his career in that position. Struggling to get into games as an attacking force and looking susceptible defensively, Bidwell was in danger of becoming a flop very early into his time at Coventry City.

An emergency move to left centre-back appears to have helped Jake Bidwell settle into life at the club. Earning himself a run in the team, Bidwell appears to have settled down at the club as a result and has looked more at home with his team-mates in pre-season.

Nonetheless, Jake Bidwell cannot be certain of his place as the team's first-choice left wing-back heading into the new campaign. With competition for his position likely to arrive over the

coming week, Bidwell is going to have to demonstrate that he can help account for the dynamism and threat the team has lost at left wing-back following the departure of Ian Maatsen.

Bidwell's strongest qualities as a left wing-back appear to be his desire to get crosses into the penalty area and an ability to ghost in at the far post. With a quick, dynamic player on the other side, Bidwell could provide useful balance to the team out wide. When he gets pinned back into his own half, Bidwell doesn't appear to have the ability to carry the ball past opponents and get the team up the pitch.

A player of Jake Bidwell's experience and profile at Championship-level should not be countenancing a season of providing back-up. Perhaps Coventry City is yet to see the best of Bidwell, he is likely to have to demonstrate just what that is from early on this campaign.

# Josh Reid

LB/CB

Age: 20

At Club Since: January 2021

Signed From: Ross County

League Appearances 2021/22: 0

League Goals 2021/22: 0

League Assists 2021/22: 0

Brought in 18 months ago with a view to inheriting the left wing-back berth, that Josh Reid has made just one appearance for the club in that time – in the League Cup last season against Northampton Town – indicates that the youngster may not be of the standard that had been expected of him.

A key issue for Josh Reid appears to be that he is more of a left-back than he is a left wing-back, with his attacking instincts yet to develop. Often played on the left of a back three for the under-23 side, Reid has a lot of work to do if he is to gain opportunities for the first-team in the position he was signed to fulfil.

There is always a risk with signing young players that they don't develop as quickly or in the manner expected of them. It isn't really anyone's fault that Josh Reid doesn't look like becoming the attacking, first-team ready option at left wing-back than it had been hoped he would become. Sometimes gambles on youngsters come off, sometimes they don't. With the club having used the loan market well in Reid's position over recent years, as well as adding a senior player

on a permanent deal as well, that lack of development from Reid hasn't been especially costly.

There is still plenty of time for Josh Reid to develop into a good player. However, the indications from pre-season are that Mark Robins continues not to see him as a viable option for the first-team. A loan move to a club where he can get further first-team experience would seem a smart decision for Reid's development this year.

Whether Josh Reid will get that loan move remains to be seen, it looks unlikely, however, that he will challenge for a starting spot in the Coventry City first-team this season. In the last year of his contract, the punt that the club took on Josh Reid looks like it will not come to fruition.

# Callum Doyle

CB

Age: 18

At Club Since: Summer 2022

Signed From: Manchester City (Loan)

League Appearances 2021/22: 36

League Goals 2021/22: 1

League Assists 2021/22: 3

A ball-playing, left-footed centre-back, Callum Doyle ticks two of the boxes that Coventry City were looking for in their recruitment of defenders this summer. With a season of senior football already under his belt, at the tender age of 18, Callum Doyle has a lot going for him.

Spending last year in League One with Sunderland, Callum Doyle made a bright initial impact but faded over the course of the campaign. With burn-out from playing so many games of football in a men's division at a young age cited as the reason by Doyle's manager for his loss of form at the Stadium of Light, the hope is that the summer has provided a necessary refresh and reset in the young player's development.

The major concern with Callum Doyle is that he is pretty physically slight and struggles to compete against opponents in the air. In an unforgiving division that is the Championship, that is a weakness in his game that will be targeted by opponents. It will be up to Doyle to demonstrate that he has learned just how to compete against more experienced and physical opponents from his previous season. If

he can do that, then it will provide an excellent platform for his technical qualities to come to the fore.

Whether it's on the left side of the back three, or maybe even in the middle, Callum Doyle's excellent passing ability could provide Coventry City with an avenue in their build-up play that the team hasn't really had in recent times. With players ahead of Doyle making enterprising runs, he has the ability to turn defence very quickly into attack.

Arriving at the club alongside another left-footed centre-back, in Jonathan Panzo, Callum Doyle has a task on to win a place in the starting XI. With there being genuine strength in depth in central defence, Doyle may not face the same issue of being over-played that he did at Sunderland last season, but it might prove equally disruptive for him that he may not be able to get a run of games to settle into life at Coventry City.

Callum Doyle has the potential to be a really useful addition to the Coventry City back-line, the key question with him is whether that potential will materialise within the time he is at the club.



# Dominic Hyam

CB

Age: 26

At Club Since: Summer 2017

Signed From: Reading

League Appearances 2021/22: 43

League Goals 2021/22: 2

League Assists 2021/22: 0

One of the club's most consistent and reliable performers over the years, Dominic Hyam's importance to Coventry City looks like lasting for a while yet.

Having enduring a somewhat difficult first year in the Championship, Hyam proved last season that he can translate his competence and consistency in the lower leagues to this level of football. An unflashy style of centre-back who rarely picks up plaudits from outside the club, Hyam's calmness and ability to avoid mistakes makes him a key anchor around which the defence is built.

Without the blessing of outstanding physicality, pace, or technical ability, it is Dominic Hyam's positioning and timing of his actions that are his stand-out qualities. In a previous campaign for the team that was littered with costly lapses in concentration at the back, Hyam was the defender who was most notable by the lack of those moments in his game.

With there being genuine competition for places at centre-back heading into the new season, it will be up to Dominic Hyam to prove all over again

why he has been such an important player for Coventry City over the years. It would be typical of him to take another step forward while under greater pressure for his starting place.

That Dominic Hyam has been trusted by Mark Robins to play across each of the three central defensive positions in the squad – more often on his unnatural left side – is an indication of just how important Hyam is to the manager's plans. Hyam is the kind of player who allows others to look better and looks set to be a key part of how the manager seeks to rectify last season's defensive issues.

While there is always a risk that what looks certain in pre-season proves not to be the case over the course of the campaign, it really would be a shock at this point if Dominic Hyam remained anything other than one of the regular starters in central defence.

# Kyle McFadzean

CB

Age: 35

At Club Since: Summer 2019

Signed From: Burton Albion

League Appearances 2021/22: 37

League Goals 2021/22: 2

League Assists 2021/22: 0

Kyle McFadzean enjoyed a remarkable campaign last time out, looking in player of the season form for much of the opening months of the campaign. For a player of his advancing years and having looked susceptible at Championship level the season before, it was a huge surprise and bonus to see McFadzean reach that level of performance.

A centre-back who is at his best when his sole task is to physically impose himself on opponents and head crosses away, it was especially remarkable to witness McFadzean add a greater level of mobility than ever to his game last year. Whether that can be counted on heading into a new season is likely to define McFadzean's campaign.

After a shaky start to life at Coventry City three seasons ago, Kyle McFadzean has made himself an essential performer for the club. While that is partially to do with how much stronger and imposing he is physically when compared to his defensive colleagues, McFadzean's ability to project less tangible qualities of authority and leadership at the back are what has made it so difficult for the team to move on from him.

This season may well have to be the one where serious plans are made to phase Kyle McFadzean out of the side. While there has been little indication of a drop-off in McFadzean's performances, there has to be a wariness that the decline in a player of his age can be sudden and irreversible.

One of five senior centre-backs on the books, Kyle McFadzean currently has the least pressure on his place because he is the only one that offers genuine presence and leadership in the middle of the back three. It potentially leaves the defence lacking any kind of authority if McFadzean cannot replicate something close to his performance levels from last season.

Maybe this will be the year in which Coventry City learn how to defend without a Kyle McFadzean figure in the side. As it stands, he remains one of the most integral elements of the squad.

# Michael Rose

CB

Age: 26

At Club Since: Summer 2019

Signed From: Ayr United

League Appearances 2021/22: 29

League Goals 2021/22: 3

League Assists 2021/22: 2

On talent alone, Michael Rose is probably one of, if not the, best of Coventry City's centre-backs. The issue is that the Scot is much more susceptible to losing concentration than his defensive colleagues. The pressure really is on this season for Rose to stamp out the sloppiness that creeps into his game.

Michael Rose's stand-out quality as a centre-back is his ability on the ball. Capable of picking out some remarkable passes, Rose can play a big role in the team's build-up play when at his best. Following the recruitment of another ball-playing centre-back, in Callum Doyle, that ability of Rose's may be much less remarkable this year, but it also affords the Sky Blues with the option with two players on either side of the defence who can completely open out the play.

As a defender, Michael Rose is reasonably solid and can occasionally dominate. Rose's shortcomings seem to result from a lack of standout physicality or pace, which means he has to maintain a high level of concentration in order to come out on top of his defensive duels. When he falls short of that level of

concentration, that is where he becomes susceptible as he doesn't have a natural way of bailing himself out.

Michael Rose has the ability to be a stronger performer at Championship level than he has currently shown, his task this season will be able to add the concentration and consistency on top of that natural ability. With extra competition in central defence having been sourced this summer, Rose could find himself out of the matchday squad entirely if he doesn't step up.

At 26 years old and entering the final year of his contract, this is an important season for Michael Rose. As someone who has been hyped up in recent years as having the talent to progress further in the game, his primary challenge this season will simply be to make himself a first-choice player at Coventry City.

The good Michael Rose would be a big asset for this club. The time is nigh for him to demonstrate that the good Michael Rose can be a consistent Michael Rose.

# Jonathan Panzo

CB

Age: 21

At Club Since: Summer 2022

Signed From: Nottingham Forest (Loan)

League Appearances 2021/22: 1

League Goals 2021/22: 0

League Assists 2021/22: 0

A player that has been on the club's radar for at least two seasons, the addition of Jonathan Panzo seems to make a lot of sense. A young, technically-adept footballer with an excellent grounding from his time at Chelsea and the England youth set-up, it is now about Panzo demonstrating what he can do in the senior game.

Jonathan Panzo is not someone who is without experience. With two seasons of regular, senior football under his belt – in the Belgian and French top-flights – there is some tangible evidence around Panzo to indicate that his addition to the squad at Coventry City is not a complete gamble. Of course, that he is coming off a campaign where he managed just one league appearance is a concern.

An athletic and technically-adroit footballer, Jonathan Panzo's pace could prove to be his key attribute in this Coventry City side. It had been a key issue last season that the team could be caught short when it pushed up the pitch, Panzo should be able to provide cover that could help mitigate those situations.

Left-footed and comfortable on the ball, there are similarities between Jonathan Panzo and Jake Clarke-Salter, the player who he is ostensibly replacing. With much less experience under his belt than Clarke-Salter, the concern with Panzo is whether he has the personality and nous to cope with regular Championship football.

That the club has had to turn to a relatively inexperienced player in Panzo – with Callum Doyle another raw prospect recruited in defence – underlines where Coventry City currently rank in the footballing world. With improvement in defence having been a key concern heading into the new campaign, it is not certain that either Jonathan Panzo or Callum Doyle provide that. Yet there is also no guarantee that there definitely will not be an improvement in defence.

It leaves Jonathan Panzo with an excellent opportunity to step up to a senior role at a good level of football. If he can make that leap forward in his development, both Coventry City and the player himself will be in a stronger place in a year's time.

# Jamie Allen

CM/AM

Age: 27

At Club Since: Summer 2019

Signed From: Burton Albion

League Appearances 2021/22: 38

League Goals 2021/22: 1

League Assists 2021/22: 2

Looking certain to leave last summer, it was quite the turnaround for Jamie Allen, who became one of the team's most used players in the subsequent season.

Nonetheless, he enters the new season having to justify his place in the squad all over again. A dependable, hard-working player who can plug gaps across midfield, it is whether Jamie Allen has the quality to make telling contributions when the onus is on him to do so that remains the doubt with him.

Much better in central midfield than as an attacking midfielder, playing in a deeper role places the onus away from Jamie Allen's technical ability.

Appearing to struggle to control the ball quickly or strike it cleanly, that is a big issue for Allen when asked to operate in tight areas of the pitch. When afforded space to run into, that is where his industry becomes useful.

Jamie Allen is the kind of player who can make the jobs of his colleagues easier. When surrounded by more technically-gifted footballers, Allen can be a useful player in putting in the legwork in order to allow others to

flourish. If Allen is to remain a regular player for this Coventry City side, he will have to show a little more quality himself, rather than as a facilitator for others.

As part of a squad over the course of a long campaign, Jamie Allen is going to be a useful option for Mark Robins to have. While he is far from a game-changer, Allen's work-rate is going to be useful in battling for and holding onto results. That could be especially important given that Liam Kelly is likely to miss a large chunk of the campaign through injury.

Longer-term, the club may be looking to recruit a better option in Jamie Allen's position. With the club operating within limitations in the transfer market, having players around the squad that are willing to work as hard as Jamie Allen can be invaluable.

# Josh Eccles

CM/RB

Age: 22

At Club Since: N/A

Signed From: Academy Product

League Appearances 2021/22: 5

League Goals 2021/22: 0

League Assists 2021/22: 0

Having looked on the verge of a breakthrough 12 months ago, an injury-hit campaign means that Josh Eccles has not been able to make much progress over that period. For all the talent that is apparent with Eccles, he really could do with a long stretch away from the treatment table in order to get his senior career up and running.

Picking up a knock on the final day of last season, it is good news for Josh Eccles that he has been able to take part in pre-season. The task now is to stay fit and apply genuine pressure to gain a regular place in the starting XI, which he has the ability to do so.

A calm and technically-adroit midfielder, Josh Eccles' intelligence as a footballer has been demonstrated by his ability last season to perform effectively outside of his natural position, at right wing-back. Combining good energy, tactical discipline, and smart use of the ball, Eccles has the qualities to cover a number of positions.

The way things stand with the balance of the squad, it seems to make more sense for Josh Eccles to play in central

midfield this season, rather than at wing-back. With uncertainty over the future of Gustavo Hamer and Liam Kelly out injured, there is a greater opportunity for minutes in midfield, compared to right wing-back, where the club has several options for the one position.

If there is to be an academy-produced player that will breakthrough into the first-team this season, it is hard to see it being anyone other than Josh Eccles. He has all of the qualities to make himself a success in the Coventry City starting XI, it is only the worry that the injury issues he suffered last year may be chronic that place doubt on Eccles stepping up.

At 22 years old, Josh Eccles is close to passing the threshold from promising youngster into senior player. If, for whatever reason, he can't get close to the starting XI this year, it may never happen for him at Coventry City.



# Gustavo Hamer

CM

Age: 25

At Club Since: Summer 2020

Signed From: PEC Zwolle

League Appearances 2021/22: 39

League Goals 2021/22: 3

League Assists 2021/22: 10

From almost his very first touch of a ball in a Coventry City shirt, it was apparent that Gustavo Hamer would be in Sky Blue for a long time. Two seasons later, his exit has not yet come, but it looks closer than ever.

A confident, ball-playing midfielder with a fantastic range of passing, it is Gustavo Hamer's desire to take the responsibility to be at the centre of proceedings that is his strongest characteristic. While there may be players who may possess a similar level of technical ability, it is that willingness to take the mantle that marks him out for a career at a higher level than Coventry City.

While the big caveat with Gustavo Hamer is his disciplinary record, that looks to be a key element of his approach to the game. In looking to be the most influential player on the pitch, he can be desperate to prevent the game going against his team, which has often led to crude, cynical fouls or dissent. Nonetheless, it feels entirely within Gustavo Hamer's powers to play with greater discipline and still be an effective performer.

At the time of writing, Gustavo Hamer's immediate future remains up in the air. He would be an incredibly difficult player to replace, almost regardless of what kind of money the club may receive for his services. Players of Hamer's ability and desire to influence games are incredibly rare and it would be significant boon to keep him around, even if it is only for one further year.

A Coventry City team with Gustavo Hamer in it should be looking to improve upon last year's 12<sup>th</sup>-place finish. Without him, the season probably becomes more about managing a transition to a different kind of approach in midfield, while avoiding being sucked towards the lower end of the division.

Whether the club can continue to keep of Gustavo Hamer is a fluid situation that will depend on whether another club puts in a bid that is too good to turn down, as well as what happens with Callum O'Hare and Viktor Gyokeres. The reality for Coventry City is that they cannot afford to be precious about holding onto their key players.

# Ryan Howley

CM

Age: 18

At Club Since: N/A

Signed From: Academy Product

League Appearances 2021/22: 1

League Goals 2021/22: 0

League Assists 2021/22: 0

At an incredibly young age still, Ryan Howley is at a stage in his career where any involvement with the first-team should be seen as a bonus, rather than an active target.

Tall and remarkably well-built given his age, that physical advantage Ryan Howley has enjoyed in the early part of his career is less relevant when it comes to senior football. It is now about developing the technical aspects of his game which will allow him to compete against opponents who can match him for size.

In the one, brief, league appearance Ryan Howley has made for Coventry City thus far he struggled to get into the game. However, that can be written-off due to it coming in the dying embers of a game against a promotion-bound Nottingham Forest side that were well on their way to victory. That Howley has been kept around the first-team during pre-season is a much stronger indication of how close he is to breaking into the team.

Interestingly, Ryan Howley has ended up filling in at centre-back during several of the friendly matches, which

may suggest that his preferred position is yet to be established. Howley is clearly a very versatile player because he has also shown with the under-23 team that he can make an impact as a goalscoring, box-to-box midfielder.

The next year or so for Ryan Howley is going to be about defining what kind of footballer he will eventually become. He has shown at youth-level that he is a player with a lot of strings to his bow, now it's about refining what his areas of strength are when matched up against more experienced opponents.

If Ryan Howley plays more than the odd game or two this season, he will have done incredibly well. He is clearly a very promising young player, but there really shouldn't be any pressure placed on him yet to perform at senior level.

# Liam Kelly

CM

Age: 32

At Club Since: Summer 2017

Signed From: Leyton Orient

League Appearances 2021/22: 16

League Goals 2021/22: 0

League Assists 2021/22: 1

After an injury-hit previous campaign that coincided with the emergence of Ben Sheaf as his successor in central midfield, another knock picked up in pre-season is likely to spell the beginning of the end for Liam Kelly at Coventry City.

While there have been questions as to how impactful Liam Kelly can be at Championship-level, he has shown on a reasonably regular basis over the past couple of seasons that he can at least be a sturdy presence in the centre of the park in this division. That physicality and experience Kelly provides can be useful in competing with the more direct opponents in the Championship, as well as helping calm things down when the team is struggling to take control of games via possession.

Injured or not, Liam Kelly was always likely to have to play a diminished role in the first-team this season. With the team playing with two in central midfield most of the time, Kelly's technical limitations have been more apparent against a higher-calibre of opponent. If a fully-fit Kelly is to have a role to play this season, it will probably be either as a late substitute

to help hold onto games or to steady the ship here and there when the team's form dips.

With Mark Robins having revealed that Liam Kelly will miss a sizeable chunk of the start of the campaign with this latest injury, it leaves a hole in the squad that cannot be filled with the present options. Players of Kelly's experience and status at the club cannot be magicked out of thin air, it would be very hard to find a replacement for the specific kind of role Kelly might be able to play this season.

This is probably going to be Liam Kelly's last year at Coventry City. For someone who has played such an integral role in the club's rise up the divisions, it really would be a shame if he was unable to play much of a role this year due to further injury issues.

# Ben Sheaf

CM/CB

Age: 24

At Club Since: Summer 2020

Signed From: Arsenal

League Appearances 2021/22: 35

League Goals 2021/22: 2

League Assists 2021/22: 3

Ben Sheaf had a point to prove after signing a permanent deal at the start of last season and certainly did so in the campaign that followed.

From looking unimposing and error-prone in his first season to a much more assertive and composed midfield presence last year, Ben Sheaf demonstrated the value in being patient with footballers, especially those in their early 20s. If he can make further progress this season, Sheaf would have a strong case for being among the upper echelon of midfielders in the Championship.

Tending to operate as the deepest-lying midfielder, Ben Sheaf likes to keep things ticking over in possession rather than seeking eye-catching long-range passes. With Gustavo Hamer alongside him to do the flashy stuff, Sheaf's rhythm gives the team good control in the centre of the park. Were Hamer to leave, Sheaf may have to add a little more threat to his passing to account for the creative deficit there would otherwise be.

Without the ball, Ben Sheaf is the kind of player who prefers to avoid the need for big defensive actions through

being in the right place ahead of time. However, he showed last season that he can also get stuck-in to the challenge when needed, as well as push up the pitch and hassle opponents off the ball.

Having demonstrated that he can be relied upon as one of the team's key players, this year should be about Ben Sheaf demonstrating how much better he can be. The potential departure of Gustavo Hamer would place even more responsibility on Sheaf's shoulders, but he has shown a lot of the qualities to suggest that he would be able to step up to that kind of importance for the team.

The sort of player who has yet to earn particularly notable plaudits from outside the club, if Ben Sheaf can get any better this season, he will be the next player Coventry City will be worried about being picked off by a bigger club.

# Marcel Hilssner

AM/W/CM

Age: 27

At Club Since: Summer 2021

Signed From: SC Paderborn

League Appearances 2021/22: 8

League Goals 2021/22: 0

League Assists 2021/22: 1

Having contracted a form of asthma shortly after signing for the club and picking up a serious injury while out on loan last season, Marcel Hilssner has had some incredibly bad luck during his time at Coventry City. Whether things would have transpired differently without those issues seems doubtful, nonetheless.

A player with little experience above the third-tier of German football, the signing of Hilssner ahead of the club's return to the Championship was a punt. While there is always a chance with any signing that they don't come off, to have handed a three-year contract to a player the club probably weren't sure would be of the requisite quality seems rather foolish.

That Mark Robins had decided pretty quickly that it wasn't even worth taking a look at what Marcel Hilssner might provide the team seems a damning indictment of the process behind recruiting him. While the recruitment team has played a big role in the team's success in recent years, Hilssner is one of a number of overseas signings that were not of the required standard and have been left sitting on relatively long-term

contracts. It is little surprise that the club has seemingly turned away from overseas signings over the past year or so.

Nursing a long-term injury heading into the campaign, there is little chance of getting Marcel Hilssner off the books before his contract expires next summer. While that is unfortunate for both the player and the club, it is a lesson in not handing long-term deals to players you aren't sure of.

# Callum O'Hare

AM

Age: 24

At Club Since: Summer 2019

Signed From: Aston Villa

League Appearances 2021/22: 45

League Goals 2021/22: 5

League Assists 2021/22: 8

While recent rumours, at the time of writing, linking Callum O'Hare with a move to Burnley look to have subsided, Coventry City fans have to be wary that O'Hare is one of a number of key players who the club may not be able to hold onto before the end of the transfer window.

Callum O'Hare's biggest assets as a footballer are his incredible work-rate and ability to carry the ball past opponents in the final third. Those two qualities combined are incredibly rare to find in attacking, creative players and have been why O'Hare has made himself central to Mark Robins' plans for much of the past three seasons.

The frustration with Callum O'Hare is that his end product is underwhelming in comparison to how often he is able to get into dangerous areas of the pitch. While his poor technique and lack of composure when it comes to finishing is well-known, that lack of a cool head also translates to his passing in the final-third. These have been issues in O'Hare's game that have shown little sign of improvement over the past two seasons.

A good player at Championship-level, just how much better Callum O'Hare can be will depend on whether he can add that missing composure and intelligence in the final third to his game. O'Hare has had every opportunity at Coventry City in recent years to make that leap and has yet to do so on a consistent basis.

With a lack of killer instinct in front of goal having been a key reason why last season's play-off bid faded, Callum O'Hare discovering that this season is potentially the single biggest individual contribution any player would be able to make this season. O'Hare has the capacity to make that leap but there continues to be something stopping him from doing so.

Nonetheless, Callum O'Hare has been linked away from the club for a reason. He is one of the team's most important players and would be very difficult to replace.



# Kasey Palmer

AM

Age: 25

At Club Since: Summer 2022

Signed From: Bristol City

League Appearances 2021/22: 6

League Goals 2021/22: 1

League Assists 2021/22: 0

Having struggled to get into a Bristol City side that finished below Coventry City last season, it is fair that Sky Blues fans have been underwhelmed by the addition of Kasey Palmer. However, football is more complex than that and there are reasons to believe that Palmer may be a better fit at the CBS Arena than at Ashton Gate.

A former Chelsea youth-team player, who worked with assistant manager, Adi Viveash, Kasey Palmer showed a lot of promise in the early part of his career. A player who combined bursts of energy with moments of skill as part of a Huddersfield Town side that won promotion to the Premier League, Palmer has shown that he can be a highly-effective performer at Championship level. That promise is why so many clubs in this division have taken the punt on him.

What has held Kasey Palmer back in his career thus far has been injury issues. Unable to get the consistent run of games over the past few years to play himself into form, the injuries have also affected Palmer's ability to play in the bursts of energy that he did so effectively while at Huddersfield Town in his first senior season. To

manage that, Palmer has developed a more languid approach to his game, looking to play precise, difficult passes to provide penetration in the final third.

When it comes off, Kasey Palmer can open doors in defences that not many other players will be able to. When it doesn't, there is little impact that he can make otherwise. If Palmer's role is to act as a game-changer from the bench, or to come in for the odd game, that will be less of an issue than if he is forced to play week-in, week-out – such as if, for example, Callum O'Hare was to leave without adequate replacement.

With work on his fitness and consistency, Kasey Palmer could prove to be a really astute addition to this Coventry City squad. His technical ability could provide a point of difference in the final third that the team hasn't really had in recent years.

# Will Bapaga

W/AM

Age: 19

At Club Since: N/A

Signed From: Academy Product

League Appearances 2021/22: 10

League Goals 2021/22: 2

League Assists 2021/22: 0

Involved with the first-team at a young age, Will Bapaga is reaching the period of his career that may well define what kind of player he will develop into.

After a handful of appearances from the bench for Coventry City, Will Bapaga picked up his first experience of first-team football last season, in the National League, at Grimsby Town. Bapaga made an impression at Blundell Park with his skill and explosiveness but fell out of favour with the manager and was sent back in January.

That Will Bapaga couldn't nail down a starting place in a fifth-tier team shouldn't necessarily be seen as an indication that he can't make it in the Championship at Coventry City. The first loan spell for youngsters is often about getting a feel for what senior football is all about. Furthermore, he is only 19 years old and still has plenty of time to develop and mature as a footballer.

The promising sign off the back of that loan spell is that Will Bapaga has become a more decisive and impactful player for the under-23 side. A key question mark against Bapaga was

whether he could add a goal threat to the obvious pace and skill he possesses, five goals for the under-23s since January is a demonstration that he has progressed as an attacking player.

Finding the right loan for Will Bapaga this season could be productive in allowing him to take that next step in his development. However, the club have to be a little cautious in making sure they can find the right team for him, or risk stalling his progress. At Bapaga's age, it wouldn't be the worst thing in the world to stick around the under-23 side for the next few months and further cement his reputation as a dominant player at that level, rather than being thrown back into the deep end in senior football.

# Danny Cashman

W/AM/ST

Age: 21

At Club Since: Summer 2021

Signed From: Brighton & Hove Albion

League Appearances 2021/22: 23

League Goals 2021/22: 2

League Assists 2021/22: 2

Brought in last summer and immediately loaned to Rochdale in League Two, just what the plan is for Danny Cashman at Coventry City remains to be seen.

After a bright start to life at Spotland last season, Cashman spent a large chunk of the campaign either on the bench or out of the squad entirely. While that is something that can happen to players out on loan, it was strange that the club didn't look to recall him in January when it was clear that he wasn't in favour anymore at Rochdale.

A technically-skilful and quick footballer who has largely operated from wide areas, but can play centrally, Cashman is reasonably similar in terms of style to Callum O'Hare. However, Cashman has yet to show that he can be consistently impactful at anywhere near the level to play at the Championship and it is likely that he will have to seek out another opportunity somewhere out on loan this season.

In the second year of a two-year contract, Danny Cashman needs to be targeting this season as one where he

can prove to Mark Robins that he is worth keeping at Coventry City over the longer-term. An injury in pre-season has robbed Cashman of what may be his best opportunity to show the manager what he is capable of.

The club took a punt on Danny Cashman last summer and it doesn't look like he is going to get anywhere close to the first-team. That is something that can happen in the recruitment process, and it is unlikely to have cost the club much money that it doesn't look like it will come off.

The target this season for Danny Cashman is likely to be in proving to another club at a lower-level that he is a player he can play regular football for over the next few years.

# Matt Godden

ST

Age: 31

At Club Since: Summer 2019

Signed From: Peterborough United

League Appearances 2021/22: 24

League Goals 2021/22: 12

League Assists 2021/22: 2

It cannot be denied that Matt Godden brings goals to the side when he plays. The biggest knock against Godden is that he has struggled to stay injury-free, beyond 10-15 game spells, while at Coventry City.

Reaching double figures in the Championship last season in just 24 appearances, Matt Godden has proved that he can be as effective at this level as he has been in the lower divisions. If he can be kept to a reasonable standard of fitness this year, the club needn't be concerned about a lack of goalscoring were Viktor Gyokeres to leave.

However, it would not be a simple case of replacing Gyokeres' goals with Matt Godden's goals, football is a more dynamic game than that. While Godden will put in a good effort and occasionally show quality outside of the penalty area, he is nowhere near as effective at leading the line and getting the team up the pitch as Gyokeres is. While Godden may end up scoring a similar amount to Gyokeres, they are very different kinds of strikers.

Furthermore, Matt Godden's fitness issues make him a difficult player to plan around. As someone who requires a specific style of play in order to be effective, it is particularly disrupting to have to adapt to when Godden is and isn't available.

As someone with such a specific set of strengths it almost suits Matt Godden and the team that the injury issues have forced him into these short, sharp spells in the starting XI. Of course, the player will want to demonstrate that he can keep himself fit for a full campaign, which could provide Godden with the run of games to develop into a more complete presence in attack. How realistic that is for a 31 year old remains to be seen.

# Viktor Gyokeres

ST

Age: 24

At Club Since: Summer 2021

Signed From: Brighton & Hove Albion

League Appearances 2021/22: 45

League Goals 2021/22: 17

League Assists 2021/22: 5

An incredible first full season at Coventry City from Viktor Gyokeres has engendered the likelihood that he may leave the club within the next 12 months.

It is not just Viktor Gyokeres' goals, but the all-round threat that he provides that makes him so coveted. Not only is he physically well-built, not only does he have good control of the ball, not only is he incredibly hard-working, it's that all-round package that makes him such a unique footballer.

Despite registering 17 goals last season, it is Viktor Gyokeres' finishing that is the weakest aspect to his game. With a habit of taking a few too many touches, or just not striking the ball very cleanly, only Aleksandar Mitrovic and Dominic Solanke took more shots than Gyokeres in the Championship last season, both of whom ended up scoring far more goals. Were Gyokeres to end up at a higher-level, or at a club where he wasn't guaranteed a starting place, that could be the aspect of his game that would put pressure on his place in the side.

Coventry City's plans this season with Viktor Gyokeres and without him would be very different. With him to call upon, the team could build around having a guaranteed presence in the final third, along with the likelihood of around 20 goals. Without him, the team is not just losing a goalscorer but someone who has so often been able to get others going through his ability to drag the team up the pitch.

With such a unique style, backed up by the number of goals he scored last season, Viktor Gyokeres is the kind of player who does not stay at Coventry City long. Ideally, he can be kept hold of for another year longer so that the team could maximise his impact. There is a realistic chance, however, that an offer could be made for his services before the end of the transfer window that is too big for the club to turn down.

Having initially looked in danger of being completely forgotten about when he first arrived at Coventry City, Viktor Gyokeres is the kind of player who would leave a huge hole were he to depart.

# Fabio Tavares

ST

Age: 21

At Club Since: January 2021

Signed From: Rochdale

League Appearances 2021/22: 7

League Goals 2021/22: 1

League Assists 2021/22: 0

Prolific at under-23 level, there were inevitable calls for Fabio Tavares to gain first-team involvement last season. The youngster made a reasonable impact in the seven cameo appearances he made, only Mark Robins will know whether Tavares has done enough to earn a place in the senior squad this year.

The most notable element of Fabio Tavares' game is his pace. From almost the first moment that he stepped onto the pitch for the Coventry City first-team, his teammates instantly began looking for ways in which to exploit his natural speed. Combined with a decent level of technical skill, Tavares has the potential to terrify opposing defences by either running directly at them or in behind them.

The main doubt with Fabio Tavares is his physicality. Against deeper-lying defences, or smart, experienced centre-backs, Tavares may struggle to get himself into games. That is why he couldn't carve out a starting place earlier in his career with Rochdale and is why there should be caution about getting too excited about his early appearances for Coventry City.

While there may be a case for sending Fabio Tavares out on loan to build confidence as a senior footballer, there is always the risk that sending him to the wrong club could be worse for his development than keeping around for the first-team for the odd appearance. In what is set to be a congested campaign, another potential contributor to the first-team is only going to be useful for Mark Robins.

On top of that, there are doubts as to the status of three of the four senior strikers, which could further aid Fabio Tavares in gaining a role to play in the first-team this season. It will be up to Tavares to continue making impacts on games whenever he is called upon. As someone with qualities no other player in the squad has, pace, there is a big opportunity for Fabio Tavares to accelerate his career this season.



# Martyn Waghorn

ST/W/AM

Age: 32

At Club Since: Summer 2021

Signed From: Derby County

League Appearances 2021/22: 27

League Goals 2021/22: 1

League Assists 2021/22: 2

Although Martyn Waghorn wasn't necessarily brought into the club last summer for goals, a return of just one in the 27 league appearances that he made was more than a little underwhelming.

Starting off the season fairly well, playing as a foil for Viktor Gyokeres in attack, Martyn Waghorn looked like he was just about to get going before he picked up an injury towards the end of September. The striker may well feel he has been the victim of bad luck at Coventry City, as he never really got a run in the side following that knock, but there is an argument that a better player would have been able to force their way back into the fold.

Martyn Waghorn appears to be something of a confidence player who needs a run of games to get going. The issue he faces heading into the new season is that there is a lot of competition for places in attack and he may simply not get the run of games that he requires to build a head of steam. For someone of his age, there is a further concern that he has lost the physical capacity to be as effective as he once was and may not be worth the effort to get into form.

If Martyn Waghorn is to stay around this season, he is going to show a greater capability to impact games when coming off the bench or when called in for the odd start. Tyler Walker showing form in pre-season has put greater pressure on Waghorn to justify his place in the squad, the onus really will be on him to perform if and when called upon.

Were there to be a club out there willing to take on Martyn Waghorn on a loan or permanent basis, Coventry City would probably be willing to listen to offers. At this stage in the transfer window, that does not look like happening and both the player and club may well have to find a way to make use of him in the final year of his contract.

# Tyler Walker

ST

Age: 25

At Club Since: Summer 2020

Signed From: Nottingham Forest

League Appearances 2021/22: 34

League Goals 2021/22: 3

League Assists 2021/22: 0

Arriving two summers ago as the future of Coventry City's attack, that time has yet to come for Tyler Walker, which looks to have seriously stalled his development as a footballer.

After ending up as top-scorer in an injury-hit first year at the club and scoring twice in four starts last season, Tyler Walker has done nearly everything he could have done to be a success at Coventry City. His issue has been that Matt Godden has proven to be a more effective version of the type of striker that he is, with the emergence of Viktor Gyokeres this year relegating Walker even further down the pecking order.

Tyler Walker's lack of impact on loan in League One at Portsmouth during the second half of last season was probably not a fair reflection of his ability – having scored freely at that level with Lincoln City in the recent past. However, his career has undoubtedly stalled over the last year, and he will need to prove this season that it was simply an aberration.

Having scored a few goals in pre-season, the door doesn't look completely closed on Tyler Walker at

Coventry City. It would certainly save the club both money and time were Walker to step up as another impactful option in attack this season, which is something that would otherwise need to be sourced in the transfer market.

Tyler Walker showed last year that he is a much more effective player as a starter than from the bench. As a very similar kind of striker to Matt Godden, but a touch less clinical in front of goal, Walker may not be able to benefit from the run of starts that he requires to build confidence and form, which raises the issue of just what he provides the team when he is not scoring.

In slightly different circumstances, Tyler Walker may have been heading into this campaign as Coventry City's main striker. Despite some promising signs in pre-season, it seems like he would probably be better off finding somewhere he can rediscover his mojo with regular football.

# Mark Robins

## Coventry City League Record

Matches	299
Wins	125
Draws	76
Defeats	98
Win%	45.1

## Career History

2007-09 – Rotherham United

2009-11 – Barnsley

2012-13 – Coventry City

2013-14 – Huddersfield Town

2014-16 – Scunthorpe United

2017-Present – Coventry City

It has now been five consecutive seasons of progress under Mark Robins, making it one of the longest periods of relative success in the club's history. It is now quite hard to imagine a time when the club wasn't in such safe hands, but there may eventually be a point where the progress cannot continue, and that may be soon.

The optimistic view is that Mark Robins has continually found ways to keep the club moving forward despite the difficulties he has encountered throughout this second stint with the Sky Blues. From having to quickly put together a promotion-winning team in League Two, losing Marc McNulty in the first season back in League One, to winning promotion and establishing Coventry City back in the Championship after the club was forced into exile in Birmingham, Mark Robins has always been able to maintain a vision and ability to keep taking Coventry City to better places.

As has been written so often about Mark Robins, it is his combination of pragmatism and forward vision that has been central to turning this club around from the doldrums. He has managed to avoid being swept up in both the overbearing optimism and all-consuming pessimism that comes with Coventry City. He has known both what he wants to achieve and, more importantly, how to get there.

Heading into this third season in the Championship, just how Mark Robins is looking to achieve that next step looks less clear. Ideally, the manager would have looked to have added an extra one or two pieces of quality on top of what was a team that looked so close to success last year. However, the financial reality the club exists in has meant that Robins has only been able to bring in one free transfer, along with several very inexperienced loan players.

As much as clubs like Luton Town and Huddersfield Town showed last season that teams with smaller budgets can compete and achieve things in the Championship, over the long-run, the clubs with the bigger budgets are going to be the ones that generally win things. Unless Mark Robins can pull off something remarkable, something fundamental about the

running of the club would have to change in order for Coventry City to realistically be able to make further progress in this division.

The only thing that can change over the short-term is the sale of one, or more, of this team's star players. The club has not sold a player for a big fee for quite some time now and that is clearly having an impact on Mark Robins' ability to grow the squad.

However, selling one of a team's best performers carries the risk that they will not be adequately replaced. If a sale were to happen before the end of the window, the club would have little time to source a quality replacement, which would likely redefine what this season would be about.

There is a genuine danger of the club falling back into the cycle of losing its best players, being left to plug gaps in the squad, and gradually getting weaker that ended up leading to Coventry City's relegation from the Championship back in 2012. The main source of optimism right now is that Mark Robins is still around and has been convinced enough of the intentions of those running the club to have signed a new deal as recently as last May.

Perhaps Mark Robins' lack of success at other clubs still colours his view of potentially taking the step to leave Coventry City in order to fulfil his ambitions elsewhere. It would be a harsh view to take on himself as the Mark Robins of 2022 is a very different manager to the one of 2007-2016.

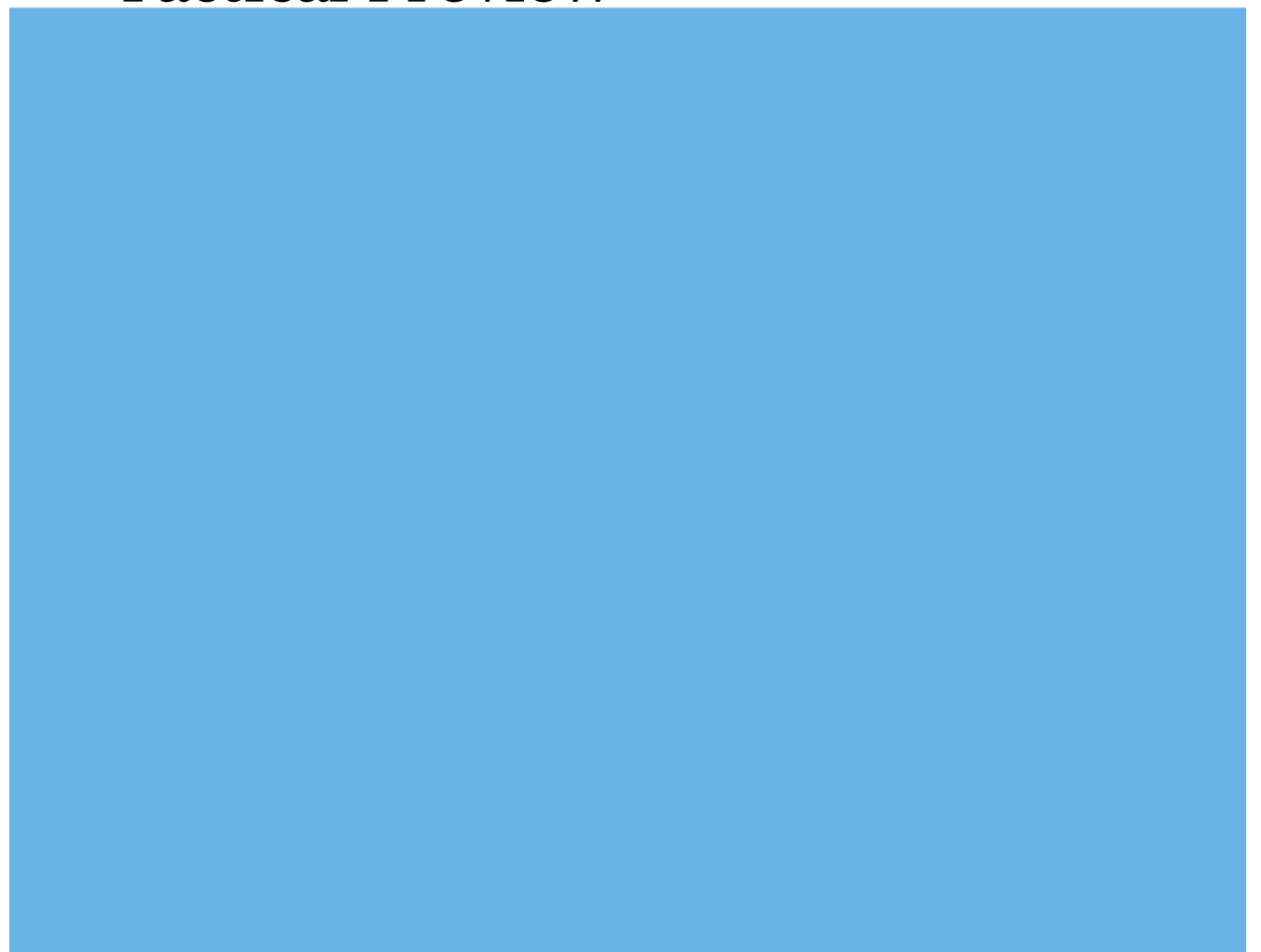
Having once been a manager almost wholly consumed by pragmatism, Mark Robins has been able to build an identifiable playing style at a football club, while achieving tangible markers of success along the way. The patience he has received at Coventry City has helped foment his vision, but Mark Robins has never been better-set than now to move onto a bigger club and achieve better things.

That is why it should be seen as a boon for Coventry City that Mark Robins still believes that this football club is the right place for him to be. As much as there is a degree of pessimism entering the new season, the manager would not be around if he felt that the club was in danger of moving backwards.

There is no guarantee that Coventry City will be able to build on a largely encouraging previous campaign last time out, in Mark Robins, the fans should be confident that there is the man in place to try and find a way to make it all work. Whether the team's best players stay or not, whether the club makes further moves in the transfer market or not, with Mark Robins in place there should be the assuredness that what is taking place will make sense further down the line.

As much as any assumptions in football cannot be taken for granted, what is certain is that Mark Robins has overcome greater obstacles at Coventry City than a slow transfer window and, maybe, losing one or two key players.

# Tactical Preview



# 3-4-1-2



Missing Pieces	Excess Players
Left Wing-Back	Liam Kelly
	Fabio Tavares

Mark Robins tended to prefer this formation for much of last season due to having greater depth in the striker positions in comparison to the attacking-midfield positions.

With Viktor Gyokeres and Martyn Waghorn forming an effective partnership earlier in the campaign, followed by Matt Godden finding form soon after, a 3-4-1-2 system played to the strengths of the team's form players. As the campaign wore on, however, the issues that it caused further back started to become apparent.

Due to Callum O'Hare often pushing up to join the front three, it left the midfield two with a lot of ground to cover. That mattered less when the team knew they could find goals by going from back to front quickly, against deeper-lying opponents, it left the team requiring a high degree of precision to create decent chances. Without the ball, that midfield two could often find itself overwhelmed – not aided by the wing-backs tending to drop in alongside the back three – allowing opponents to gain and drag Coventry City around the pitch.

This system looks set to be Mark Robins' preferred shape heading into the new season as the balance of the squad hasn't really changed from last year. The key difference, at the time of writing, is that Jake Bidwell is a less dynamic ball-carrier at left wing-back than Ian Maatsen was last season, which may hinder the team's threat in wide areas. Without that penetration on both flanks, it makes Coventry City a little easier to defend against as opponents can concentrate on marking the front two out of the game.

Additionally, it is a system that would be made less viable if the club were to lose Callum O'Hare, who is the key link between midfield and attack.



# 3-4-2-1



Missing Pieces	Excess Players
Left Wing-Back	Tyler Walker
Attacking Midfield	Martyn Waghorn
	Fabio Tavares

The 3-4-2-1 has been a staple of Mark Robins' Coventry City sides over the past three seasons, with the shape offering solidity without the ball, along with the ability to either break quickly or dominate possession when the team gets the ball.

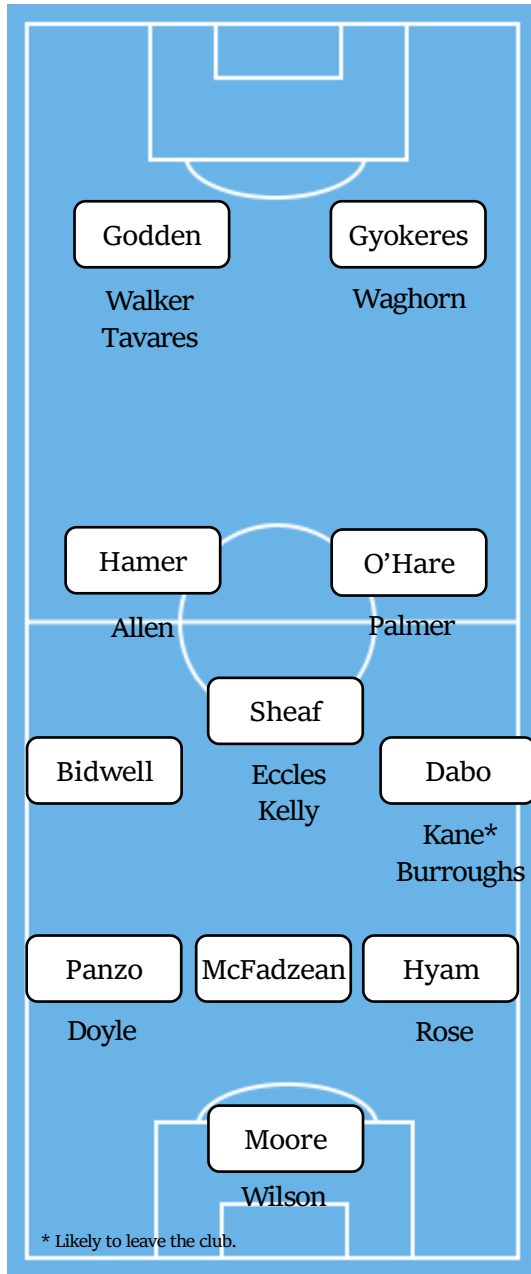
Integral to making the system work in recent years has been the work-rate of the two midfielders operating just behind the central striker. Requiring the discipline to join the midfield when the team is out of possession and then the energy to quickly get up the pitch to support the attack, it has been a role typified by Callum O'Hare's approach to the game.

The concern with the system has been that it can leave the team short on attacking penetration. That has been eased somewhat by Viktor Gyokeres' ability to break through defences with his sheer presence in attack, but the lack of goalscorers from midfield has often left the team toothless, nonetheless.

The addition of Kasey Palmer to the squad offers Mark Robins something different in attacking midfield, a player who can potentially unlock opponents with killer passes in the final third. However, Palmer's languid style carries the downside of losing some discipline in that role. Furthermore, Palmer does little to improve on the lack of goalscorers operating just behind the strikers.

Over the course of a long campaign, this is likely to be a shape that Mark Robins will turn to from time-to-time. Due to the number of strikers in the squad, 3-4-2-1 is unlikely to be the preferred system as it leaves too many players with little role to play and places an emphasis in an area of the pitch, attacking midfield, where the team is still a little short in.

# 3-5-2



Missing Pieces	Excess Players
Left Wing-Back	Liam Kelly
	Fabio Tavares

This is a system that would probably become more viable were Callum O'Hare to leave, as it would negate the requirement to play with a number ten.

The benefit of a 3-5-2 formation is that it would allow the team to play with a strike partnership while also having numbers in midfield to prevent the team getting overwhelmed without the ball. Additionally, if the two most advanced central midfielders can push both forward and wide, it places less of an onus on the wing-backs to provide all of the threat in wide areas.

The energy of the midfield three is critical to making a 3-5-2 work, otherwise, it can lead to a lot of football being played directly in front of opposing defences, rather than around and behind them. In Gustavo Hamer, Jamie Allen and Callum O'Hare, there may be just that energy but there is an argument that maybe only Jamie Allen is at their best in such a role.

The main knock against this shape currently is just what to do with Callum O'Hare. While O'Hare has the energy to operate in a box-to-box role, whether he has the positional discipline to play in a deeper midfield spot, rather than with the freedom to stay forward without the ball, is not something he's ever had to show for the club. It would potentially be a waste of one of the team's most talented players.

It wouldn't be too much of an adaptation for Coventry City to execute this system, but Mark Robins has shown little inkling to play this shape and discussion of it feels theoretical at this moment in time.

# 4-1-2-1-2



## Missing Pieces

Central Midfield  
Cover

## Excess Players

Fabio Tavares

To go even more experimental, how about if Coventry City ditched a back three this season?

It is highly unlikely to happen, given that the club has gone out and signed two centre-backs this summer, on top of the three that they already had, but it might be something that Mark Robins could end up having to resort to due to injuries or poor form.

The questions about a back four really do begin in defence, where Kyle McFadzean's lack of mobility would be a concern, on top of there not really being an authoritative presence at the back to take his place. The past few seasons have shown that the back-line really depends on McFadzean's physical presence, taking him out of the side, and losing a central defender on top of that, would raise huge questions as to the team's defensive stability.

Further forward, the positive aspect is that a diamond midfield set-up would probably be a good utilisation of the team's current resources. Without natural wide players, any system involving wingers isn't viable. A midfield diamond allows Ben Sheaf to play in a sitting role, utilises the energy of Gustavo Hamer and Jamie Allen, and allows Callum O'Hare to play in his natural position.

There would be a lack of cover beyond that first-choice midfield, and a big question may be whether it would be worth sacrificing the defensive solidity of a back three for a system that may not improve the team's attacking threat.

Unless circumstances force Mark Robins' hand, it is hard to see a reason that would currently see Coventry City move to a back four.

# Predictions



Pos	Team
1	Norwich City
2	Middlesbrough
3	Sheffield United
4	West Bromwich Albion
5	Watford
6	Luton Town
7	Bristol City
8	Swansea City
9	Burnley
10	Queens Park Rangers
11	Millwall
12	Coventry City
13	Preston North End
14	Blackburn Rovers
15	Stoke City
16	Sunderland
17	Huddersfield Town
18	Cardiff City
19	Hull City
20	Rotherham United
21	Wigan Athletic
22	Blackpool
23	Birmingham City
24	Reading

## Championship Predictions

This season has the potential to be one of the most even contests across the table in some time in the Championship.

A key reason for that is that two of the three relegated Premier League clubs – Burnley and Watford – look to be attempting an overhaul of their playing styles, which may hamper chances of automatic promotion. Norwich City look much stronger, with only a sense of fatigue at their promotion-relegation cycle likely to cause much jeopardy for them this season.

Of the rest, Middlesbrough under Chris Wilder should be considered a serious force heading into the new season. Sheffield United should be strong but are relying on a core of older players who could suddenly decline. West Bromwich Albion have added proven quality to their squad, but I'm not convinced in Steve Bruce as their manager.

With doubts of varying degrees of seriousness against at least four of the six favourites for promotion, this really could be a year in which a

dark horse goes on to do something special. Luton Town look prime dark horse candidates, with Swansea City, Bristol City and maybe even Millwall decent bets to gate-crash the top six.

Teams like Queens Park Rangers, Preston North End, Blackburn Rovers, Stoke City, and probably even Coventry City too, may feel they have an outside chance of pushing for the play-offs but are probably just lacking the requisite quality or depth in order to do so.

Sunderland, Cardiff City, Hull City and Huddersfield Town may feel they are being predicted lower than they deserve but have too many unknowns against them to be confident of where they'll finish.

In the relegation battle, Reading, as well as Birmingham City, are strong candidates for this year's basket case clubs. Neither Rotherham United and Wigan Athletic have strengthened their League One squads, while Blackpool may struggle to cope with the loss of Neil Critchley as manager.

# How Will We Do?

Heading into the new season without any major additions or departures from the squad (at the time of writing) suggests that Coventry City are currently in a holding phase. Unable to make major changes, the task for Mark Robins is to drain a little extra from a team that last season occasionally looked pretty close to doing something special.

The emergence of Viktor Gyokeres last year, along with the continued progress of players such as Gustavo Hamer, Callum O'Hare and Ben Sheaf allowed the team to thrive in this division, having only just survived the year before. Performances stayed at a high quality for much of the campaign, and it only would have taken a touch more luck (or quality) in front of goal and just a touch more defensive solidity to have turned a 12<sup>th</sup>-place finish into a much better one.

While Mark Robins hasn't been able to make additions to the squad that seem like they can add those missing touches, it may only take 5-10% more progress from the team's existing key players to tip this team over the edge. In any case, this season for Coventry City will be a very different one if they can hold onto all of their best players, compared to if replacements have to be sourced within the remainder of the transfer window.

As much as this summer has made it apparent that the club could do with the income from a big player sale in order to become proactive again in the transfer market, maybe this is a situation to value keeping together a high-performing set of players over the money that might be raised by selling one or two.

Of course, it is not guaranteed that Coventry City can improve on last season even if all of Callum O'Hare, Viktor Gyokeres and Gustavo Hamer remain at the club. After all, the team's form since mid-November last year ranked 20<sup>th</sup> in the Championship, with two of the teams in worse form getting relegated.

In particular, the form at the CBS Arena is something that will have to be addressed from very early on in this campaign. After such a strong start back in Coventry, the Sky Blues mustered just three wins out of their final 14 home fixtures last year, which includes a run of four without a win to end the season.

Those fantastic performances and wins at home had been such a key source of inspiration last year. That is why attendances and the atmosphere at the CBS Arena improved so much and is a key factor in season ticket sales having reached record levels heading into the new campaign. As much as having loads of fans and making noise shouldn't necessarily demand being rewarded with results, some further electric displays by Coventry City at home this year really would keep the momentum the fanbase has built over the past few years going.

After a relatively circumspect summer in the transfer market and speculation linking the team's key players away, it feels like the first month or two of the campaign is going to be really important this year in setting the tone. Some early wins and performances would engender the sentiment that this Coventry City side is making progress. A slow start, along with a player sale or two, could be enough to make this campaign much more of a slog.



As for how this team shapes up, just how firm the defensive unit holds this year could be where this season sinks or swims. That is where Mark Robins has targeted the majority of his recruitment, and it could make the job of the attacking players that bit easier if the team can more reliably keep goals out.

The goalkeeping situation could well be the crucial area of the defensive unit. Simon Moore was dropped for the final few games of last season and will have to show that he has been able to reset over pre-season in order to recapture his earlier form for the club. It was apparent over those final games last year just how much of a sticky spot the team would be left in with Ben Wilson as number one in goal.

In central defence, the additions of Jonathan Panzo and Callum Doyle provide useful options for Mark Robins, the question is whether such inexperienced players truly address the sloppiness at the back that reared its head over the final half of last season. Jonathan Panzo's pace could prove to be an asset in bailing the team out when it gets caught pushing up the pitch, but the preferable situation would clearly be to avoid being caught out in the first place.

As for the current crop of senior defenders, this is an important year for both Dominic Hyam and Michael Rose in stepping up in responsibility as the club prepares to move on from Kyle McFadzean's physical and leadership presence in defence. While Kyle McFadzean showed few signs of decline last year, it could leave the team in a sticky spot if he suddenly dropped-off this year.

At wing-back, keeping Fankaty Dabo fit for the majority of the campaign could prove to be very important. Without Dabo, and with it not known how strong a performer rumoured left wing-back signing, Tayo Adaramola will be, the team's options in that area could lack the pace and dynamism that

can help open the game up for the attacking players.

In central midfield, the future of Gustavo Hamer and the absence of Liam Kelly are the big question marks. With Ben Sheaf, Jamie Allen, and Josh Eccles around, the absence of Kelly could probably be shouldered within the existing options available. Were Hamer to leave, the club would have to source some form of replacement who can either replicate his quality to control games or to progress the ball from the defence into the final third with speed and purpose.

Slightly further forward, the potential loss of Callum O'Hare would be supremely disruptive to Mark Robins' plans. It is clear that the manager adores O'Hare's prodigious work-rate in that role just behind the strikers, his departure may have to cause a re-think in midfield and attack to accommodate the likely lack of replacements available within Coventry City's financial power who can replicate just what Callum O'Hare is good at.

It would be a huge risk leaving Kasey Palmer as potentially the only O'Hare replacement, due to the former Chelsea youngster's fitness and consistency issues. Palmer's use, at least for the early part of the season, will either be as a potential partner in attacking midfield for O'Hare or someone who can provide something different from the bench with his desire to attempt killer passes.

In attack, Viktor Gyokeres is clearly the third key player to keep hold of. His ability to drag the team up the pitch with his combination of physicality, skill and work-rate was a key factor in why there was such an improvement in performances last season. While there are other strikers on the books, none of them can come close to providing that all-round presence that Gyokeres provides in the final third.

If Viktor Gyokeres can improve his finishing, it leaves the tantalising prospect of having a striker to call on this year that could end up attaining above 20 goals this season. On top of that, Matt Godden should achieve double-figures too – fitness permitting. With that possible firepower already in place, any improvement in defence has the potential to go a long way.

As for who backs up Viktor Gyokeres and Matt Godden, the onus is on Martyn Waghorn and Tyler Walker to prove they can make an impact with what are likely to be limited minutes for them. Neither Waghorn nor Walker looked particularly suited to coming into the team for the odd appearance from the bench or occasional start last year, which is why they could well end up being offloaded if the club can be sure of finding better quality in the transfer market.

Those doubts over Martyn Waghorn and Tyler Walker should provide Fabio Tavares with further opportunities to make an impact for the first-team. Whether Tavares is of the quality or not to step up to Championship football, that factor of pace that he provides could be very well suited to coming off the bench. With two firmly-set first-choice strikers, it is really useful to have alternatives that provide a genuine point of difference.

Just where this set of players ranks compared to the rest of the Championship of this season is what is about to become apparent. The positive way to look at it is that there haven't been any major additions or departures on top of a team that showed it can trouble the best in this division last year. It may not take much improvement to make up the difference to the top six.

The negative way to look at it is that additions have not been made to a squad that was in mediocre form for the majority of last season, with there being a good chance of at least one of the better players leaving before

the start of September. If the form from the second half of last season continues, a relegation battle cannot be ruled out.

Those two extremes highlight what is so exciting and scary about this Championship season. There doesn't look to be too much difference between the teams that may end up finishing in the top six and those towards the bottom of the division. There is an opportunity for Coventry City to step into the void left by a lack of stand-out teams, but there is also the danger that those that looked well-behind the club last year have made progress while the Sky Blues have stood still over the summer.

My personal opinion is that replicating last season's 12<sup>th</sup>-place finish may be as good as this team can hope for. While this team looked close to making a breakthrough last season, it is hard to argue that the key issues of a leakiness in defence and an occasional toothlessness in attack have really been addressed. The potential of losing a key player or two within the remainder of the transfer window that is left would only make Mark Robins' task even more difficult.

There remains the potential for this Coventry City side to build on a positive previous campaign, but this summer has underlined how much of a challenge it will be to do so.

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